

# WILL A MORALLY GOOD PERSON BE SAVED, THOUGH NOT A CHRISTIAN?

*Bro. Ezekiel Oghenekaro*

Many times we have heard people say, "God will save all good people." This implies that there are good people in all churches who will be saved. It also implies that there may even be good people who have never been members of any church who will also be saved. Will all morally good people be saved even though they are not Christians?

The Bible teaches that one can never be good enough to be saved by his own goodness. In the story of the rich young ruler, Christ made it clear that no man is good except God—**Mark 10:17-27**. If people could be saved by their good deeds, then it would not have been necessary for Christ to die for our sins. The Apostle Paul wrote: For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." (**Ephesians 2:8-9**).

Paul also wrote: *For when we were still without strength, <sup>[a]</sup>in due time Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup> For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. <sup>8</sup> But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* (**Romans 5:6-8**).

Even the very best of people, who have lived long enough to know the difference between right and wrong, have sinned. The Bible says: <sup>9</sup> *What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. <sup>10</sup> As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one...; for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God* (**Romans 3:9-10, 23**).

## What Does The Bible Teach About Salvation?

In the matter of seeking salvation, no creed or doctrine of man can provide adequate guidance. Only one source can present the truth about what God expects of those who look to Him for eternal life: His inspired Word. What does the Bible say about how to be saved?

The New Testament, especially the Book of Acts, gives visual lessons in addition to the apostles' teaching. We see eight different cases in which a person or group was converted to Christ. In each case, the text supplies a picture, or partial picture, of what was done.

When we put them together, we have a complete account of all that is necessary to be saved the Bible way.

### **Case #1: Pentecost**

Acts 2 describes the beginning of the church on Pentecost. In the process, it presents the first great sermon of the Christian era. This sermon was delivered by the apostle Peter. Beginning in verse 14 and continuing through verse 36, it has one central theme: Jesus Christ the Son of God. A great multitude heard Peter's sermon concerning Christ, the Saviour of the world. Peter closed with this line: ". . . let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified" (2:36). The people's reaction is recorded in 2:37: "Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?'" In observing what happened here, we notice, first, that Christ had been preached. Second, the people believed what they had heard about Christ; they were now convinced that He must be the Son of God. They made known their faith by word of their mouth. Having gone this far, they were ready for Peter's instruction: "Peter said to them, 'Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (2:38). After the people were further instructed and exhorted, the narrative closes by saying, ". . . those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (2:41, 42). In this first example, we find that the whole process of salvation began with the preaching of Christ, after which people believed in Christ, made their belief known, repented of their sins, and were baptized for the forgiveness of their sins.

### **Case #2: The Samaritans**

In Acts 8 we find another account of New Testament conversion. We read, therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing (8:4–6). The story is quickly carried to its conclusion: "But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike" (8:12). While this narrative is briefer than the previous one, the story is essentially the same. Christ was preached, people believed, they changed the direction of their lives, and they were baptized.

### **Case #3: the Ethiopian Nobleman (Eunuch)**

In the same chapter of Acts, the inspired writer, Luke, recorded another God-given example of conversion. In this case, the man who became a Christian was a devout Jew who was living in the country of Ethiopia. While on a journey to Jerusalem, he was met by the Christian evangelist Philip, who "preached Jesus to him" (8:35). As a result of this preaching, the man from Ethiopia desired to become a Christian. The Scriptures describe what was done in these words: *As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" [And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."] And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into*

*the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing (Acts 8:36–39).*

This conversion story is almost identical to those preceding it. First, there is the preaching of Christ, followed by faith in Christ as the Son of God, confession of that faith, change of will, and baptism.

#### **Case #4: Saul of Tarsus**

It is in Acts 9 that we read the thrilling story of the conversion of a brilliant young Jewish lawyer, Saul of Tarsus: As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, *“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”* And he said, *“Who are You, Lord?”* And He said, *“I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.” . . . And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank (Acts 9:3–9).*

After three days spent in prayer and fasting, this man, who now believed in Christ as the Son of God, received a visitor named Ananias, a preacher of the gospel of Christ. This preacher was sent from God to instruct Saul as to what he must do in order to be saved. What were his instructions? *“ . . . Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name” (22:16).* In this conversion story, as in the others, faith was followed by repentance, the making known of the person's faith, and baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

#### **Case #5: Cornelius**

One of the most intriguing of all the conversion stories in the New Testament is that of a Roman army captain who was stationed with occupation troops in Palestine. His story is told in **Acts 10:1-48**.

Cornelius was a soldier in an army generally composed of heathen, bloodthirsty men. He was an officer holding a rank like a captain in our modern armies; he was commander of a hundred men. We are told that he was *“a devout man” (10:2a)*—a remarkable circumstance for an officer in a heathen army. To prevent any misunderstanding, it is specified that he was *“one who feared God with all his household” (10:2b)*. This last clause shows that he was not only a devout worshiper of the true God himself, but that he had brought up his whole family in the same religious habits.

This soldier was not one of those timid worshipers of God who make no effort to impress their faith upon the members of their families; he *“feared God with all his household.”* He was a man of great religious zeal, not one to forget his neighbours or the wants and the needs of the poor, being satisfied to make his own peace with God and live the rest of his life for himself. Rather, he *“gave many alms to the Jewish people” (10:2c)*.

The people mentioned here were the Jewish people. Cornelius was in authority over the Jewish people in the city of Caesarea, and He gave many alms to them. He was a benevolent man. That is not all; many people are benevolent but have no religious

character whatever. They have inherited a kind disposition, perhaps from good, pious fathers and mothers; they have been brought up from their childhood to have pity for the poor and distressed. However, Cornelius, in addition to this, was a praying man who “*prayed to God continually*” (10:2d).

Let us put all these statements together and see what kind of a character we have in this account: a devout man who feared God with all his house, including his servants, who gave alms to the people and prayed to God habitually. This is the man concerning whose conversion to the Lord Jesus Christ we are investigating. Perhaps some are inclined to ask, “*What conversion did he need? What change was necessary in his life?*” This is a legitimate inquiry with an important answer.

The character of the unconverted Cornelius puts to shame a great many of those who profess to be good Christians. Also, I have met many who are so “*good*” already, though not part of the Lord’s church, that they have no fears about eternity. They will describe how honest and truthful they are; how prompt to pay every debt and discharge every obligation; what good husbands, fathers, and neighbours they try to be; and how they do their share in providing for the wants of the poor in the community in which they live. They say, “*I can’t see what there is for me to fear,*” and so they are content to live and die as they are.

Now, what if we were to place our own portraits side by side with that of Cornelius and see which stands higher in the scale of excellence, according to a true estimate of humanity? He was a devout man who gave many alms to the people; he feared God, and his whole family—including servants—did the same. He prayed to God continually. If that man needed to hear words by which he might be saved, who does not require something of the same kind? If that man did hear such words, wouldn’t it be wise for each of us to listen to those same words and secure the salvation of our souls?

After all that is said about his excellence of character, Cornelius had committed sins. He knew, when he evaluated his life, that he had committed many sins against God. He had never approached God in His appointed way to secure the forgiveness of a single sin, for he did not know how; he was not acquainted with Christ. The very best man or woman in the world today has many sins which must be forgiven.

When Peter concluded his preaching, “*he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ*” (**Acts 10:48**). When Cornelius and the others with him responded to the command of Peter, they were saved. In telling Cornelius to send for Peter, God’s angel had said, “*And he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household*” (**Acts 11:14**). This was the same Peter who would later write, “*Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ*” (**1 Peter 3:21**).

### **Case #6: Lydia**

**Acts 16** contains a brief account of the conversion of a talented business woman who had migrated to the continent of Europe to sell purple cloth. While in Philippi, Paul and his companions sought out this woman and her household and preached to them the good news of Christ. The account in the Scriptures says,

*Therefore, sailing from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace... <sup>14</sup> Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. <sup>15</sup> And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." So she persuaded us (**Acts 16:11–15**).*

The woman Lydia, as we find her, was not at home. She was from Thyatira, a city in Asia Minor. However, she was at this time in the city of Philippi, about three hundred miles away from her home, across land and sea. She was a business woman, engaged in selling purple cloths. Since purple dye was the most costly known to the ancients, only the finest fabrics were dyed purple. To be arrayed in "*purple and fine linen*" (see **Luke 16:19**) was to be rich. Lydia was not engaged in a cheap business. If she was employing her own capital in purchasing and selling these goods, then she was a woman in comfortable circumstances. At the same time, she was apparently dependent upon her own livelihood rather than being supported by a husband, brother, father, or friend.

Many women who are active in the business world become part of its selfish schemes, with little regard for religious character. We are told in this brief account that she worshiped God. Nobody in that city worshiped God except as the result of Jewish education and training; all the rest were heathen. Lydia, then, was either a Jewess of Thyatira or a convert to the Jewish faith. We are unable to determine from the text which of these was her position, but we know that she worshiped God.

Paul and his companions encountered Lydia and some others on the Sabbath day. In the pagan town of Philippi. Being engaged in business, Lydia had to decide each Sabbath day whether or not to keep her shop open in order to compete with the cloth dealers who knew nothing of the Sabbath. Many business people and workers who profess to be Christians labour through the Lord's Day as if it were any other day, claiming that they are compelled to do so—but when the Sabbath dawned, Lydia's place of business remained closed. She and the women whom she employed went elsewhere. On the occasion mentioned in our text, they were spending the holy day on the bank of the river which flowed close by the walls of the city. Since the Scriptures mention that Paul supposed there would be a place of prayer there, we have reason to believe that this had been the custom of that group of women for a considerable time. Lydia, then, was not only a woman of business; but she was also a woman of fidelity to her God and would not be seduced by profit to forsake the faithful observance of God's law.

Certain responses have been appointed for every person like her to do, and she did those things. She believed what Paul preached. She repented of whatever sins she knew she had committed, and she was baptized. The text says, "*When she . . . had been baptized, she urged us, saying ' . . . come into my house and stay . . . '*" (**Acts 16:15**). The result of the opening of her heart was that she opened her home; she gave practical attention to the duties prescribed for her.

### **Case #7: The Philippian Jailer**

Also in chapter 16, we find the story of the conversion of a second Roman official. He was a jailer in an important Roman city, Philippi. In his prison, Paul and Silas were being held under his special care. As they were praying and singing praises to God at midnight, an

earthquake occurred, and the men were freed from their stocks (**Acts 16:25, 26**). The jailer, awakened from his sleep, called for lights and rushed to evaluate the situation. To his surprise and relief, the prisoners were still there. We read, trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, and after he brought them out, he said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household (**Acts 16:29b–33**).

In the strange setting of a prison house, Paul preached concerning Christ. Again, those who heard, believed, committed themselves to the Lord, turned away from the ways of the world, and were baptized into Christ.

### **Case #8: The Corinthians**

The eighth and final account of conversion in Acts is in chapter 18. There the story again concerns Paul, who had moved on to the city of Corinth. In a distinctly pagan setting, he found a small colony of Jews who had a synagogue. “He was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks” to accept the gospel message (**Acts 18:4**). As the story continues, we learn that “Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized” (**Acts 18:8**). When Paul preached concerning Christ, people heard and believed, committed their lives to the Lord, and were baptized.

### **Conclusion**

Perhaps you are a good moral person, zealous for your religious practices. If so, these are good qualities. God approves of zeal and good morals. But please understand that, by themselves, these qualities are inadequate for you to receive eternal life. This is true even if you believe that Jesus Christ is God's Son and man's Saviour.

You also need to be sure you have the truth, obey the true gospel, and unite with other faithful Christians in Jesus' one true church. Otherwise, you are like a man in Chicago who wants to travel to New York, so with zeal and dedication he boards a plane headed to Houston. No matter how zealous and dedicated he may be, the truth is that he is going the wrong direction. In order to reach his destination, he must turn around and go the right direction.

Have you obeyed the true teachings of Jesus' gospel in order to receive forgiveness of your sins? Are you following His true plan for faithful service to Him in His true church?