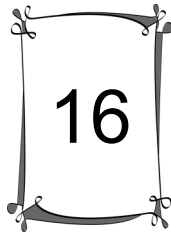


The background of the slide is a scenic landscape. A paved road curves through a valley, flanked by trees with autumn foliage in shades of yellow, orange, and green. To the left of the road, a railway track with overhead power lines runs parallel. In the distance, a large, rugged mountain peak rises under a cloudy sky. The entire scene is framed by a green border with decorative, rounded corners.

# Sermons of Robert Murray M'Cheyne

## **16. The Difficulty and Desirableness of Conversion**

**Sermons**  
**of**  
**Robert Murray**  
**M'Cheyne**



**The Difficulty and  
Desirableness of  
Conversion**

***“I waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings. And he hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God: many shall see it, and fear, and shall trust in the Lord” Psalm 40:1-3.***

There can be little doubt that the true and primary application of this psalm is to our Lord Jesus Christ; for though the verses we have read might very well be applicable to David, or any other converted man, looking back on what God had done for his soul, yet the latter part of the psalm cannot, with propriety, be the language of any but the Saviour; and, accordingly, the 6th, 7th, and 8th verses are directly applied to Christ by the apostle in the 10th chapter of Hebrews: “Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not; but a body hast thou prepared me: in burnt-offerings and sacrifices for sin thou hast had no pleasure. Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me) to do thy will, O God.”

The whole psalm, therefore, is to be regarded as a prayerful meditation of Messiah when under the hiding of his Father’s countenance; for, how truly might he who knew no sin, but was made sin for us, he on whom it pleased the Father to lay the iniquities of us all, how truly might *he* say, in the language of verse 12, “Innumerable evils have compassed me about: mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more than the hairs of mine head; therefore my heart faileth me.”

According to this view, verses 1-3 are to be regarded as a recalling a former deliverance from some similar visitation of darkness, in order to comfort himself under present discouragement . And who can doubt that he who was a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief, experienced many more

seasons of darkness and of heaven-sent relief than that which is recorded in the garden of Gethsemane? His so frequently retiring to pray alone, seems to prove this. But as it is quite manifest that his description of his iniquities laying hold upon him, is expressed in words most suitable to any burdened but awakened sinner, so the verses of my text are every way suitable to any converted soul looking back on the deliverance which God hath wrought out for him. "Waiting, I waited for Jehovah" (as verse 1 may be most literally rendered), expresses all the intense anxiety of a mind aroused to know the danger he is in, and the quarter whence his aid must come. "And he inclined unto me," expresses the bodily motion of one who is desirous to hear, bending forward attentively. "And he heard my cry."

"He brought me up also out of an horrible pit,  
Out of the miry clay,  
And set my feet upon a rock;  
He established my goings.  
And he hath put a new song in my mouth,  
Even praise unto our God:  
Many shall see it, and fear,  
And shall trust in the Lord."

He expresses the state of an unconverted man under the striking imagery of one who is in an horrible pit, and sinking in miry clay; while the change at conversion is compared to setting his feet upon a rock, and establishing his goings, and putting a new song in his mouth. Regarding, then, my text as a true and faithful picture of that most blessed change in state and character which, in Bible language, is called conversion, I proceed to draw from these words two simple but most important conclusions:

## I. The difficulty of conversion.

So difficult and superhuman is the work of turning a soul from sin and Satan unto God, that God only can do it; and, accordingly, in our text, every part of the process is attributed solely to him. “*He* brought me up out of an horrible pit, *he* took me from the miry clay, *he* set my feet upon a rock, *he* established my goings, and *he* put a new song in my mouth.” God, and God alone, then, is the author of conversion. He who created man at first, alone can create him anew in Christ Jesus unto good works. And the reason of this we shall see clearly by going over the parts of the work here described.

The first deliverance is imaged forth to us in the words: “*He brought me up out of an horrible pit;*” and the counterpart or corresponding blessing to that is, “*He set my feet upon a rock.*”

There can hardly be imagined a more hopeless situation than that of being placed, like Joseph, in a pit, and especially an horrible pit, or a pit of destruction, as the Psalmist calls it. Hemmed in on every side by damp and gloomy walls, with scarce an outlet into the open air, in vain you struggle to clamber up to the light and fresh atmosphere of the open day; you are a prisoner in the bowels of the earth, the tenant of a pit of horrors. Such is your state, if you be unconverted; you are lying in a pit of destruction; you are dead while you live — buried alive, as it were; *dead* in trespasses and sins, while yet you *walk* in them. You cannot possibly ascend to the light of day, and the fresh atmosphere above you; for the pit in which you are, is indeed your prison-house; and except you be drawn up from it by the cords of grace, it will usher you into that yawning pit which the Bible says is bottomless.

Such is your state, if you be unconverted. You are under the curse; for “cursed is every one that continueth not in all things written in the book of the law to do them;” and you have never continued in *any* of these things, doing them from the heart, as

unto the Lord, which only can be called doing them. You have never savingly believed on the Son of God; and therefore you are "*condemned already.*" You have never been lifted out of the pit of condemnation. "*He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life; but he that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him;*" that is, it is never lifted off him. The pit of wrath and destruction, in which you are by nature, is never exchanged by you. until you leave it for the pit of wrath eternal.

Since this horrible pit, then, represents the state of wrath and condemnation in which we are by nature, how impossible is it that we can extricate ourselves from it! To escape from the prison-house of earthly kings is a hard and daring enterprise; but who shall break loose from the prison-house of the eternal God? Who shall clamber up from the pit of condemnation in which he confines the soul? or who can work out a pardon for past offences? Who can blot out the sin of his past life? Look back upon your lives, brethren, spent in forgetfulness of God, in desires and deeds contrary to God; and then remember he is infinitely just, he cannot lie, he cannot repent, and say if you think it an easy thing, or a possible thing, to save yourselves from the fearful pit in which you are now reserved for his wrath ?

But if you cannot save yourself from the pit, and set your feet upon a rock, much less can you extricate yourself from the miry clay, and establish your own goings. The pit of destruction represents the wrath you are in by nature; the miry clay represents the corruption you are in by nature. To be standing in a dry pit, as Joseph was, is bad enough; but, ah! how hopeless and wretched, when you are standing in miry clay! To be under condemnation for past sins, one would think to be misery sufficient; but your case is far more desperate, for you are also sinking daily under the power of present

corruptions. Every struggle which you make to get up from your wretched condition, only makes you sink deeper in the miry clay; and every hour you remain where you are, you are sinking the deeper; your ever getting out becomes more hopeless.

How truly does the growth of sinful habits in you resemble the sinking of your feet in miry clay! Which of your habits does not grow inveterate by exercise? How does the habit of swearing grow upon a man until he is absolutely its slave? and so with those more refined sins whose seat is in the heart. Every day gives them new power over the soul, every new indulgence binds your feet more indissolubly than ever in the evil way; and though you may, nay, in the course of nature you must, change your lusts, your passions and desires, yet every change is but like extricating one foot from the miry clay, only to set it down again, in another spot to sink again.

Ah! the undoneness of an unconverted heart; what imagination is bold enough to paint all its horrors? Look in upon your own hearts, ye who are unchanged in heart and life; and, oh! if the Spirit of grace may but use the passage we are speaking of to convince you this day of your sin, you shall see how truly there is within you a dark chamber of imagery, a depth of spiritual wretchedness, and inability, either to forgive your own self, or to make your heart new, either to set your feet upon a rock, or to establish your goings; which can be described only by such ideas as those of an horrible pit, and sinking in miry clay.

A third step in conversion you cannot take for yourself; and that is, the putting *a new song* in your mouth. A song is the sign of gladness and light-heartedness, and hence James saith: "Is any merry? let him sing psalms." And the spoilers of Jerusalem, when they would put mockery on the sorrows of the exiled Israelites, required of them *mirth*, saying: "Sing us one

of the Songs of Zion.” But to sing a *new* song, even praise to our God, is a privilege of the believer alone. To be merry and glad in heart, whilst a holy God is before the thoughts, that is a privilege only of him whose feet are settled on the Rock, Christ.

It is true the unconverted world have a mirth of their own; and they, too, can sing the song of gladness. But here lies the difference: They can be glad and merry only when God is not in all their thoughts, only when a veil of oblivion is cast over the realities of death and judgment. Keep away all serious thought of these things, and then they can revel, like Belshazzar and his thousand lords, when they drank wine, and praised the gods of gold and of silver. But unveil to their eyes the grand realities of a holy and omnipresent God, of death at the door, and after death the judgment, and then is their countenance changed (as was Belshazzar’s at the appearance of the mysterious hand); their thoughts trouble them, so that the joints of their loins are loosed, and their knees smite one against another.

But to the believer a holy God is the very subject of his song, praise to our God; and the view of death and judgment do not break in upon this divine melody. On his dying bed he may begin the song which shall be finished only when he wakes up in glory. Now, what unconverted man has the power to put this supernatural song in his mouth, this strange joy in his heart? Gladness cannot be forced, and least of all this, the Christian’s gladness. If thou be unforgiven, unjustified, still at enmity with God, how canst thou raise one note of praise to him? In the fourteenth chapter of Revelation, where the redeemed sing, as it were, a *new song* before the throne, and before the four beasts and the elders, it is added: “And no man could learn that song, but the hundred and forty and four thousand which were redeemed from the earth.” None but *new* creatures can learn



this new song. Angels cannot join in it; for it is the hymn of the *redeemed*, of those who were sinners, and have been made *new*. And, oh! if angels cannot, how much can unconverted, unredeemed sinners join in that eternal harmony.

In every way, then, how unspeakably hard a work is conversion! How *impossible* with man but with God all things are *possible*. He hath provided the Rock, Christ; and his ear is not heavy that it should not hear, if we but cry; his arm is not shortened that it cannot save, if only we will inquire of him for this.

**II. From this picture of a true conversion I deduce, not only the difficulty, but also the *desirableness of conversion*.**

If you can imagine the delight of being lifted out of the horrible pit, where wrath only awaited us, and having our feet set upon the Rock, where our foundation is firm and solid as the everlasting hills, and we are raised high above the reach of enemies, for our defence is the munition of rocks, then, my friends, you have some notion of what it is to be taken out of wrath into peace, to be translated from being under the curse to the privilege of standing on the righteousness of Christ — a standing on which you are justified, so that neither man, nor angel, nor devil, can bring accusation against you.

And, again, if you can imagine the delight of being carried out of the miry clay, where your feet were continually sinking deeper and deeper every hour, and of having your goings established, a straight path set before you, and solid ground beneath you, then you have some notion of what it is to be taken out of your worldly lusts, and desires, and cares, and thoughts, and anxieties, and habits of sin, in which every new day found you sinking deeper and deeper, and always with less hope of recovery; and to be enabled to love God and the things of God, “to set your affection on things above,” “to bring every

thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.”

And still further, if you can imagine the delight of exchanging the groan of the prisoner bound in affliction and iron, for the song of the captive who has been set free — the emancipated slave — then you have some notion of what it is to exchange the sullenness and cheerlessness of an unrenewed spirit for the joy and light-heartedness of the redeemed, and the new song of praise which only they can sing.

But when you have imagined all these things, you will have a notion merely, and nothing more, of the desirableness, of conversion. The riches of Christ are *unsearchable*. I might ransack all nature for images. I might bring all conditions of misery and sudden peace and happiness into contrast; yet would I fail to give you a just idea of the blessings received in conversion; for, indeed, “eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor hath it entered into the heart to conceive, the things which God hath prepared (in this world, aye, in the hour of believing) for all them that love him.” But leaving images borrowed from nature, which may only confuse, let me simply lay before you *the realities* which these images signify.

The first thing to be had in conversion is *peace with God*: “*Justified by faith we have peace with God.*” This is the immediate effect of standing on the Rock, Christ. Sin-laden man dost thou see no desirableness in peace with an offended, forgotten, despised God? Art thou so enamoured of the horrible pit of enmity and condemnation, that thou hast no desire to be out of it? Then, indeed, it is in vain to tell you of a Saviour; you see no beauty in Christ.

The second thing to be had in conversion is a *holy life*: “To as many as receive Christ, he giveth power to become sons of God.” Depraved man, whose heart is wrinkled with habitual sins, dost thou see no desirableness in a holy life? I do not ask thee if it would be pleasant to thee this moment to restrain and

cross all thine appetites, and desires, and indomitable lusts — I know it would appear to thee intolerable; but I do ask thee if thou seest no desirableness in having these very appetites and desires changed or taken away in their power, so that strictness and holiness of life would no longer appear irksome, but pleasantness and peace. Art thou so delighted, not with the objects which gratify thy passions, but with these very passions themselves, that thou hast no wish to be made new? Then, indeed, it is needless to tell thee of the Sanctifier.

The third good thing to be had in conversion is a *joyful and thankful heart*: “We joy in God, through our Lord Jesus Christ.” This is the song of the redeemed. The mirth of heaven is thankfulness and praise. The mirth of heaven upon earth — that is, of the converted mind — is the same, even praise to our God. If, then, cheerfulness and thankfulness of mind, which will endure even amid all the gloominess of the death-bed, and the dark valley, and the awful insignia of judgment — if these be desirable gifts of mind, these form parts of the desirableness of conversion.

But to many of you I know it is in vain that I talk of the desirableness of conversion; for you do not yet feel the misery of being unconverted, the wretchedness of being a child of wrath, and a slave of corruptions. When we tell you that the unjustified are in an horrible pit, that the unsanctified are sinking in miry clay, you tell us that you never felt any horror about your situation. Nay, you have many pleasures, and you are comfortable and at ease. Ah! most wretched of all unconverted men, you are in the horrible pit; yet you are insensible to its horrors. You are in the miry clay, sinking every step you take; yet you feel no alarm. You know that you never savingly believed in Christ; yet you have no horror when the Bible tells you you are “*condemned already*.” You know that your heart has never been *made new, born again*; and yet you

do not tremble when the Bible tells you that “*without holiness no man shall see the Lord*”

You remind me of nothing so much as of a man travelling in a snow storm, wandering far from home or shelter, and every step he takes his feet sink the deeper in the drifted snow; but a strange insensibility creeps over his mind. Death itself has lost its horrors. As his danger increases, his fears diminish. A deep slumber is quickly descending on every faculty, till he sinks down quietly to sleep, but never to rise again. In like manner, your insensibility, instead of being a sign that there is no danger, increases the danger and horror of your situation a thousand-fold.

As the Bible is true, the state of every unconverted man is so awful, that could you see it as God sees it, the words, “*an horrible pit and miry clay,*” would seem too feeble to express it. “*The sorrows of death and the pains of hell*” might, perhaps, come nearer your view of it. Ah! then, strive hard to know the misery of being unconverted. Be determined to know the worst of yourself; for thus only will you see the desirableness of conversion, — the excellency of Christ.

And now, then, laying together the two conclusions which I have drawn from our text — the difficulty of conversion, so great that God himself must be the author; and the desirableness of conversion, so great that peace, and holiness, and joy. all depend upon it — suffer the word of exhortation, to seek it in the only way in which the Psalmist found it: “*Waiting, I waited for Jehovah,*” that is, *I waited anxiously, “and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry.”* He is more ready to hear, than thou to ask. The Rock is already laid. Christ hath died, and thou art this day besought to stand upon his righteousness; and being in Christ, you shall every day become more a new creature; and being a new creature, you shall sing a new song of praise to Him who hath loved us.

One word to those of you who can look back upon an experience like that described in my text; who can say that God hath brought you out of an horrible pit and the miry clay, and set your feet upon a rock, and established your goings, and put a new song in your mouth. Take you heed that the following words be also realized: “*Many shall see it and fear, and shall trust in the Lord.*” How many on every hand of you are yet unconverted, both in the pit and in the clay! Let them see, then, how great things God hath done for your soul, that they may fear lest they die unconverted; lest this glorious change never come to them; lest they die old creatures, tenants of the horrible pit, to remove only to the pit eternal; lest they be altogether swallowed up in the miry clay; and thus, moved by fear, they may be persuaded to trust in God, as you have done — to rest on the Rock, Christ, for righteousness.

“Let your light so shine before men, that they, seeing your good works, may glorify your father which is in heaven.”  
Amen.

