

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 26, 2007**

TURNING POINT

2 Corinthians 5:17 – 6:2

I want to tell you about something that happened 40 years ago this past week, in August 1967. Do you remember 1967? Do you remember where you were, what you were doing, what your life was like, and what was going on in the world in 1967? Some of you, of course, weren't around back in 1967, or you were much too young to remember anything from that time.

The first Super Bowl game was played in January 1967, with the Green Bay Packers defeating the Kansas City Chiefs. In 1967 Elvis married Priscilla. In 1967 Dr. Christian Barnard performed the first successful heart transplant surgery in Cape Town, South Africa. In 1967 Thurgood Marshall became the first African-American Justice on the United States Supreme Court. 1967 was the year both Tim McGraw and Faith Hill were born, as well as Julia Roberts and Will Ferrell. In June 1967 Israel defeated its neighboring Arab nations in what is known as the *Six Day War*.

In the summer of 1967, LBJ was in the White House, the Cold War was very much a thing of the present, the war in Vietnam continued to escalate, cities such as Detroit and Newark were being torn apart by race riots, the sexual revolution was in full flower, and young people in unprecedented numbers were experimenting with drugs. It was a summer of uncertainty and instability in the world, a time of dramatic social upheaval in America.

On a much lighter note, it was 40 years ago this past week – on August 24, 1967 – that McDonald's introduced the Big Mac sandwich. That, however, is not the event I want to tell you about.

In the summer of 1967, I wasn't quite 12 years old. But it was a time of insecurity and anxiety and restlessness for me. I was about to make the jump from elementary school to junior high, which meant new teachers, making new friends, and adjusting to a new school environment with students in grades 7-12 in the same building. The passion of my life in 1967 was baseball. I ate, drank, and slept baseball. Given the chance, I would play it morning, noon and night.

But my life changed profoundly that summer. The pastor of the little country church my family attended in northwestern Pennsylvania preached a series of sermons that summer on biblical prophecy and the promise of Christ's second coming. In those sermons he expressed his belief, based on his interpretation of biblical prophecy, that Jesus would return before the end of 1968. He was wrong about that. And he should have known better, since Jesus Himself said that no one except God the Father knows when it will happen (Matthew 24:36). But what my pastor said got my attention.

This is yet another evidence to me of the sovereignty of God, for it demonstrates God's ability to use the mistakes and errors and gaffes of His servants, however well-intentioned they may be, for His sovereign and saving purposes.

What happened in me that summer was this: I heard my pastor say that Jesus was coming again very soon, that His return would occur before the end of the following year. As I thought about what my pastor said, I realized that if Jesus was coming back, I wasn't ready to meet Him. I realized that Jesus wasn't Lord of my life. I was. Even though I was just 11 years old, I knew my relationship with God wasn't right. There was a barrier separating me from God. I had this haunting awareness in my heart that things were not right between me and God. I recognized that there was a sin problem in my life that had to be dealt with.

The religious milieu in which I was raised was unabashedly revivalistic. Altar calls were common in the church we attended. Revival services led by visiting evangelists were held at least once a year for a week or more.

In August 1967, a visiting preacher from Kentucky named Jimmie Rose came to our church and conducted services for a week. My mother, God bless her, insisted that I go at least once. I could choose which night. I decided to go on Wednesday, August 23.

I don't remember a word of the preacher's message that night. But I know the Spirit of God was at work in my heart. And when the invitation to trust in Christ for salvation was given, I was out of my pew. I went forward and knelt at the front of that little church as a signal of my desire to be cleansed from my sin, to be made right with God and to receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of my life. That night, as the Puritans would say, I was "savingly wrought upon" by the grace of God.

It was a turning point in my life. It was, in fact, the decisive turning point in my life. It was the beginning of what is now a 40-year-long journey of walking with Christ by faith. You would think, after 40 years, that I would be further along on the road to spiritual maturity! But I know that in His time God, who began a good work in me, will bring His redemptive, transforming work in me to completion (Philippians 1:6).

I want to be crystal clear about something. I was not saved by walking down the aisle of that country church. I was not saved by going forward in response to that altar call 40 years ago. Some people have the mistaken belief that if you walk forward when an invitation is given – for example, if you go forward at a Billy Graham crusade – it means you are saved. But that is not necessarily the case. The act of going forward never saved anyone. We are saved by the sovereign grace of God and only by the grace of God on the basis of Christ's saving work on the cross for us.

It is a mistake – a serious mistake – to confuse the physical act of going forward in response to an altar call with the spiritual response of repentance from sin and saving faith in Christ. This confusion – thinking I must be a Christian since I went forward at a Billy Graham crusade or in a church service – can lead to a false sense of assurance.

Going forward at an altar call doesn't make a person a Christian any more than going into a garage makes you a car or going to FedEx Field makes you Joe Gibbs.

God's saving grace is just as available in your pew or at home or at Starbuck's – or even where you work or go to school – as it is at the front of the church, if that is where God sovereignly chooses to visit us with His salvation and moves us in our hearts to respond in faith. Salvation does not occur because a person walks down the aisle. It is something that must take place in the heart.

However, as R. T. Kendall, long-time pastor of London's Westminster Chapel, has written in his book *Stand up and Be Counted*, the act of coming forward is one way for a person who has responded in his heart to the message of the gospel to publicly confess faith in Christ as Savior. It can also be a way to seek God and His grace, even if a person is not sure of his or her salvation. In Kendall's words, it is a way to "stand up and be counted" as a follower of Christ. For me, 40 years ago, it was a way of acknowledging my need of a Savior and placing my trust in Christ.

My life changed that night. I became a new person. Spiritually alive in Christ. Reconciled to God the Father. Forgiven. Set free from the burden of my sin and guilt.

As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:18: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ." It is all from God. God did it all. From beginning to end, salvation is God's work. On my own initiative, I would never have chosen to come to Christ. On my own, I would never have turned to Christ in faith or become a follower of Christ. Never. But God, through the work of the Holy Spirit, opened my eyes to my spiritual poverty. He convicted me of the problem of sin in my life and my need of a Savior. He drew me to Himself with cords of love, and gave me the gift of faith to embrace Christ and trust in His saving power.

People will often speak of making a decision to trust in Christ for salvation. Or they may speak of a decision to become a follower of Christ. There is a sense in which this is true. For when we come to Christ in faith we come freely, and we make a decision to follow Him. We do not come to Christ against our will. God does not force us to believe in Christ against our will. We come *freely*.

But the Bible teaches clearly that it is only by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit operative in our lives that we are able to come to Christ and choose to follow Him. We do not, we would not, we could not come to Him in repentance and faith on our own. Apart from the work of God's grace in us, we are spiritually dead. That is the verdict pronounced by Paul in Ephesians 2:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like

the rest, we were by nature objects of (God's) wrath (2:1-3).

This is the universal human condition apart from Christ and His saving work. All of us apart from faith in Christ are spiritually dead. Which means there is no life in us. Those who are dead have no ability or power to choose any good or to take any action on their own. The one who is dead must first be made alive. And this, Paul says in Ephesians 2:4-5, is exactly what God has done for us:

But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.

Do you see what Paul is saying? God is the One who has brought us from a state of spiritual death (due to sin) to new life in Christ. There is nothing any of us can do in a state of death (physical or spiritual) to make ourselves alive. Only God can do it. This He has done, says Paul, as an expression of His grace. Salvation is by grace alone (Ephesians 2:5, 8). We contribute nothing to it. We simply receive it by faith, which is itself a gift from God.

Apart from the work of God's grace in us, then, we are spiritually dead. To turn to Christ in faith we must first be made alive, spiritually speaking, by the Spirit of God, who quickens our hearts, convicts us of our sin, and gives us the gift of faith to embrace Christ as Savior and Lord. Salvation, then, is not a work we perform or a decision we make. It is a sovereign and gracious gift of God. For which we can be eternally grateful.

This is true in my life. There is nothing I did, nothing I accomplished or achieved to contribute to my salvation. It is all by the grace of God, which is truly amazing.

The same was true for a famous 19th century Christian named Adoniram Judson. Judson was a pioneer missionary to India and then Burma in the early 19th century. I've been to the church in Salem, Massachusetts, where Judson and four other men were commissioned as the first foreign missionaries sent out from America.

The son of a Congregational pastor, Judson finished at the top of his class at Providence College (Brown University), but he rejected his father's faith in a personal God. Due largely to the influence of a college friend named Jacob Eames, he had become a deist – one who believes in the existence of a God but rejects the belief that God is involved in the world or that one can know God in a personal way.

Upon graduation from college, Judson went off to New York City to seek fame and fortune. Soon, however, he became disillusioned with the emptiness of his self-seeking life. So he headed back home to Plymouth, Massachusetts. On the way home, he stopped for a night at a wayside inn. Judson had trouble sleeping that night because, in the next room, there lay a critically ill young man who was moaning and groaning in pain. Judson realized his neighbor was likely dying. During the night Judson contemplated the possibility of his own death and whether he was prepared for it.

Early the next morning he went to the innkeeper to ask about the man in the next room. “He passed away this morning,” the innkeeper said.

Judson asked: “Do you know who he was?”

“Oh, yes,” came the reply. “He was a young man, about your age. He was from Providence College. His name was Jacob Eames.”

Judson was stunned. It was his friend who had turned him away from the Christian faith of his father. All Judson could think was: “Dead! Lost! Lost!” And he realized that he was lost, too.

With that word “Lost!” echoing through his mind, Adoniram Judson returned home to Massachusetts. Under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, he soon embraced Christ as Savior and Lord, and dedicated his life to God’s service.

Sovereignly, graciously, God drew Adoniram Judson to Himself in faith and called him to a life of missionary service. In Christ – through faith in Christ – Judson became a new creation. A new person. Redeemed and renewed from the inside out. It was all from God, who took the initiative and reconciled us to Himself through Christ. Not only this, He gave us the ministry of reconciliation. He gave us the message of reconciliation to share with people near and far who are estranged from God and stuck in their sins, just as we who have come to faith in Christ once were. He has made us – ordinary people like you and me – Christ’s ambassadors. We are His representatives. His emissaries. His agents of reconciliation in the world. And this is the message He gave us: It is what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21:

God made Him who had no sin (that is, Christ) to be sin (a sin offering) for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.

When we trust in Christ and His saving work for us, an exchange takes place. We exchange our sin, which Jesus took on Himself when He went to the cross, for the righteousness of Christ, which is imputed to us by the free and sovereign grace of God.

Maybe you can relate in some way to Adoniram Judson’s conversion experience. Maybe you can identify with my experience. Maybe your experience is far different. Maybe you can’t even point to a specific “turning point” in your life, a particular moment when your faith in Christ came alive. But you know your faith *is* alive and that you are spiritually alive in Christ. Praise God for that.

But maybe, for some of us today, God intends this to be a turning point. Right here today.

Maybe it is time for you to get right with God. Maybe it is time for you to renounce some sin that has a stranglehold on you. Maybe it is time to get off the fence and put your trust in Christ. Maybe for someone here today it is time to quit playing Christian

and surrender every part of your life to the Lord Jesus Christ. Maybe it is time for you to stop leaning on your own understanding, to stop trying to make it through life in your own strength, and to put your hope in Christ. Maybe it is time for you to commit yourself – or recommit yourself – to live as a fully-devoted follower of Christ.

I find such great comfort and hope in these words of Jeremiah from Lamentations 3:

Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed,
for His compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
great is Your faithfulness (3:22-23).

And I never tire of calling to mind these words of David in Psalm 103:

The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love...
He does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities (103:8, 10).

I know that is true because it is God's Word. And the truth of God's Word has been confirmed in my experience.

The Bible says:

Now is the time of God's favor,
now is the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Now. Today. Right now can be a turning point for you. The same God who graciously called me to Himself in faith 40 years ago is here today. And He is still calling men and women, young and old, to come to Him in trusting faith.

Is He speaking to you today? If so, I urge you to say yes to Him and to embrace Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of your life. If God has spoken to your heart today and you have responded by putting your faith in Christ, I urge you to "stand up and be counted" and come to the front of the church while we sing our closing hymn, as a way of signaling your faith and commitment to Christ.

And if you have questions about how to become a Christian or how to get right with God, and you'd like to talk or pray with someone about what is on your heart, I invite you to come, too.

Remember: Now is the time of God's favor,
now is the day of salvation.

Don't miss it. Lord, let it be so. Amen.