

1 Thessalonians 1:9,10
Additional Reading: Psalm 135:15-21

Christian Conversion

Introduction

Now Paul moves to the subject of Christian conversion. Conversion begins with the entering in of the Word of God, and our welcome to it, leading to transformation of life. The experience is never identical in every detail with that of others for God deals with us all differently. But certain basic principles are at work in all conversions. The Gospel affects the mind - we understand the way of salvation, and discover this is what we have been looking for for years. Then the conscience is stirred – although we may display no major outward sins like murder etc, nevertheless we recognise we have been living without reference to God, turned to our own way instead of God's. Finally the will takes action - complete turn about in life, our aims, directions and outlook.

Turning to God

You turned to God from idols (1Thessalonians 1:9). Idols of wood and stone, they bowed down to them, sacrificed before them, prayed to them. Now they have turned from them. An enormous step. This had been the way of religion they had been brought up with, it had been in their families for generations. The complete break from this was very costly, leading to much misunderstanding, ridicule and persecution. They were doing the unthinkable. They were brought up to fear the punishment of the gods. Mount Olympia, the home of the gods, was only fifty miles south-west of Thessalonica. Despite the pressures, these converts had turned to God.

We in the twenty-first century are also idol worshippers. An idol is anything which comes between us and God, and takes first place. It exerts a controlling influence, and has our love and devotion. Our idol is anything that we will not give up for God, anything we serve with greater fervour than we serve God. Our idols are much more sophisticated, but still there nevertheless. My money and acquisitions - **Greed, which is idolatry** (Colossians 3:5). My pleasure. My name and reputation. My standing and the respect I command. The power I wield. My sport, my sporting heroes. My possessions – my home and the things in it, my car and my books. Other obsessions that are idolatrous can be work, TV, drugs, alcohol, sex, food. People can get eaten up by these things too. Parents can be guilty of idolizing their children, letting them have exactly what they want, their whims and tantrums, letting them rule the home. Above all is the greatest idol, the “great Pope Self” (Luther). We live for self, please self, indulge self, gratify self.

Here is the heart and the core of the problem. In various ways sinful men give allegiance to other things, allegiance that is due to God alone. Every idolater is a prisoner, held in humiliating bondage.

The idolaters in Thessalonica had turned to God from idols. The Greek word for turn, *επιστρεψατε*, is similar to the word used nine times in Acts to describe conversion, *επιστρεφω*. A radical change, complete about-turn. Instead of having their back to God, they have done a 180 degree turn and put their face to God. They turned with definite act of mind and will. The act must become an attitude. The Christian life is “life by repentance” (Luther). **Just as you received..... continue to live** (Colossians 2:6). Christians who share control of their life with the Lord, and walk hand in hand with the world, have forgotten that the Christian life is meant to be turning back on self and the world, and looking to the Lord, come what may.

Service of True and Living God

Turned to serve the true and living God. Before, they had worshipped something which was dead, and now they serve a God who is living. Their idols were false and spurious, their God is true and genuine. Idols were the work of man’s hands. God is the creator and maker of all.

The Old Testament rejoices in the term “Living God”. No wonder the psalmist ridicules the idolater and shows up his stupidity and folly (Psalm 135:15-21). Idols are no use, they cannot save, they cannot answer prayers, protect or provide, or satisfy our deepest need. The Living God is real, active, He is present everywhere, and His presence affects us at every point of our being, and gives power in our lives.

The Thessalonians relationship to Him was that they served Him as His slave (*δουλος* is a slave, not a servant). They had exchanged one sort of slavery for another. The Christian life is not negative separation from evil, but positive consecration and surrender to God for a lifetime. The Lord is centre of the life. The only thing which matters is His will. Not my will, not pleasing men, not conforming to society’s standards. My motive is His glory and praise, and not my own. Instead of seeking a multitude of ways to bring attention to myself and my cleverness and importance, His honour is the focus of all my effort.

He is absolute Master. His will embraces the whole of my life. My only interests are His interests. I just exist as a bond slave of the Master. Paradoxically, this is the secret of peace, liberty, progress in spiritual life, soul satisfaction. Many Christians are unsatisfied and ineffective, weak, and not at peace. This is because they are not the Lord’s bond slaves. They are only going so far with God, and no further. Even Jesus was totally submitted to the will of His Father. **My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work** (John 4:34). Are God’s existence and claim on us the foremost elements in our mind, and the unchanging background of all our thoughts and purposes?

Now waiting for His Son from heaven

In the past, they turned to God. In the present, they are His bond-slaves. Their future involves the expectation of the Son’s return. There is an enormous amount of Gospel truth in a nutshell in this last verse of the chapter. We have the humanity of Christ – Jesus’ human nature. There is His deity, the Son of God. His death, followed by His resurrection. the implication of the ascension, the second coming. Salvation – **Jesus**,

who rescues us from the coming wrath. There is unity of His person – the Son from heaven, is the one who died.

First a word on the coming wrath. God's present judgement is but a forerunner of the final expression of God's wrath. God's wrath is not bad-tempered passion when He cannot get His own way, nor is it vindictive spite against someone thwarting Him. But it is the righteous reaction of a holy nature against all that is sinful and contrary to His holy will. **The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness** (Romans 1:18). "One of the most openly disliked and industriously evaded parts of Paul's teaching is that concerning the wrath of God" (L.Morris). It is not only the man in the world who opposes it. To him, it is very inconvenient if there is such a thing as the wrath of God, and so he outrightly denies it, and convinces himself he isn't too bad anyway so it won't have any bearing on his future. Even in the Christian church, the wrath of God is sometimes explained away by theologians, and denial of it has influenced some Bible translators. The average preacher would rather preach on God's love than on His wrath. Hence people do not understand the Gospel - "A God without wrath bringing men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through Christ without the Cross" (Richard Nicburber [surname unclear]). "So long as we continue to reject scriptural ideas of Divine holiness, divine wrath and divine righteousness in punishment, the process of decay in the Christian church will continue" (E.Brummer). "No hell – the pulpit is preaching it, the pew is believing it, and the public are acting on it".

In 1 Thessalonians Paul makes it clear there is a coming wrath. Division is going to take place. Some, and only some, will be delivered from it, delivered because of Christ's death. God in Christ bore the consequences of His own wrath. The virtue of Christ's death is applied to us individually when by faith we commit ourselves to Him, and leave Him to undertake for us. When we trust Him, as He invites us, to deliver us.

This Christ who died, rose and ascended, is in heaven preparing a place for us and being our High Priest. One day He will come back for His people. The Thessalonian believers were waiting for the Son. There are various attitudes to the Lord's Return. Many Scriptures anticipate it – e.g. Matthew 24:44; Titus 2:13; 2 Timothy 4:8. Be ready. Look for it. Love His appearing. Wait for it. Expect it. Look forward with patience and confidence. Just like when waiting for a visitor – we have prepared, planned the meals, made a room clean and comfortable for him, planned outings, want him to be happy and comfortable, and now just waiting for the doorbell to ring. Martin Luther said he lived (and preached) as though Christ died yesterday, rose today, and is coming back tomorrow. This hope is dead in many Christians today, yet in New Testament times it was the clue to the Christians' unworldliness, their moral intensity and their confidence about the future.

Conclusion

Here are the essentials of true conversion – turn, serve and wait. Turning from idols, though they will vary with various people. Enslavement to the Lord. Living life with the true and living God at the centre. Expectantly looking to the future. Not worried if politicians fail to produce the perfect world (despite election promises!). We hope in

the Lord's Return. Here is the Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour and coming king. Trust, love, obey and wait for Him.