

September 10, 2000 by Steve Brandon



# A Look At True Conversion

## 1 Thessalonians 1:8-10

"A Look at True Conversion"

1 Thessalonians 1:9-10

### 1. The elements of true conversion (Faith and Repentance)

### 2. The results of true conversion (Service and Waiting)

The Psalmist says that the scriptures are "more desirable than gold and sweeter than the honey and the drippings of the honeycomb" (Psalm 19:14). Tonight, we get to dig into the riches of the scriptures! Tonight, we will look at two verses. Two verses, which are power packed. Spurgeon said that these two verses contain "oceans of truth." And it is our task to uncover a little bit of them.

1 Thessalonians 1:9-10

"For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come."

Now these two verses are found in a context of Paul giving thanks to God for how He worked among the Thessalonians when he was among them. In the section beginning at verse 6, Paul is bringing to mind how these Thessalonians received the gospel. There are really 4 characteristics that describe how they responded to the word.

1. They received the word with joy, despite the hardship (verse 6). "... having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit." This was obviously a work of God, for when the word comes in tribulation, there are few that receive it. And those who receive it face troubles and difficulties. It is only the Lord who can give joy in the face of these difficulties. I am reminded of the story of Peter and the apostles, who, when flogged for proclaiming the gospel of God, "went on their way ... rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name." (Acts 5:41). These Thessalonian believers were in the same boat - they suffered for the sake of the gospel, and yet, within it, rejoiced greatly.

2. They became imitators and examples (verses 6-7). "You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, (:7) so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia." We talked about this last week, how first, Paul had set the example. Then, these Thessalonians followed in the steps of Paul and in doing so, became examples themselves, worthy of being followed by others (in Macedonia and in Achaia). This is the heart of all true Christian discipleship: that you live such a life that you model what a Christian ought to be. Those who follow, become like Christ, by following you. Jesus said, "A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40).

3. The word sounded forth from them (verse 8). "For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything." Imagine the sound a loud trumpet blast! This is how the word sounded forth. You remember that Macedonia and Achaia were the regions surrounding Thessalonica. Macedonia was to the North, and Achaia was to the south. In fact, Paul mentions here how "in every place," their faith went forth. I mentioned last week that this is most certainly hyperbole, but even hyperbole has a point: the news about their conversion went far abroad. Many had heard about it. Notice that Paul writes that "I have no need to say anything," (verse 8), because the news is so well known. It would be sort of like when President Reagan was shot. The news spread around the world. There were few who needed to say anything, because it all has been said. It would be like when the Space Shuttle exploded. The news was everywhere. "I have no need to say anything." So extensive was the Thessalonian repentance known that even Paul's recounting of it was from a 3rd party source.

4. They repented (verses 9-10). "For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God."

They were truly converted. In verses 9 and 10, Paul gives their conversion experience here.

Earlier, I said that they received news of their repentance from a 3rd party. Here's what I mean: When Paul came to Thessalonica, there was great revival. He was kicked out of town, so he left and went onto Berea, Athens, and finally, Corinth (from whence he wrote the letter). Paul started to hear about what happened in Thessalonica from others in Macedonia (from towns like Philippi, Amphipolis, Apollonia, Berea), and Achaia (like Athens and Corinth) He heard about their "faith toward God" (verse 8), not from the Thessalonians. He heard about their "turning to God" (verse 9), not from the Thessalonians, but from those in Philippi, Amphipolis, Apollonia, Berea, Athens, Corinth, ...). And when he sent Timothy there, he found all of these things to be true! And so, he was thankful to the Lord for these things.

Tonight, I would like to tear apart verses 9 and 10 and dig deeply into understanding what true conversion is like. I fear for the message proclaimed across our land in many churches. I fear that there are truths in this passage, which are, quite frankly, ignored in much preaching today. I think that this message is timely for us. When we say (here in Rockford), that we desire to have a church, which proclaims the gospel clearly and strongly, we need to understand the elements of it. And tonight we will see them. I have entitled my message this evening, "A

Look at True Conversion."

After I had entitled this message, I was encouraged to find what one man wrote about this passage. He said, "Paul, you're a missionary, and you have been involved in the planting of a number of churches, could you please explain to us, in twenty-five words or less, what is the nature of true conversion?" "What is the Christian Life?" "Now that we're part of his glorious church, how do we act" "But tell me quickly Paul, I haven't much time." Here is Paul's response, as it were. It's turning to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven. There is the Christian life summarized, in these two verses."

1. The elements of true conversion (Faith and Repentance)
2. The results of true conversion (Service and Waiting)

We look first of all at ...

## 1. The elements of true conversion (Faith and Repentance)

We find these elements in verse 8 (faith) and verse 9 (repentance). Look first at verse 8, "in every place, your *faith* toward God has gone forth." Look at verse 9, "They themselves report about ... how you *turned* to God from idols." The message that went forth from Thessalonica throughout the world was that these Thessalonians had a "faith toward God" and that they "turned to God from idols." And these, are two elements that are always present in conversion: (1) A faith toward God; and (2) a turning toward God. It is interesting to note that in the Greek text, the same Greek preposition is used in both of these phrases: Their faith *toward* God, their turning *toward* God.

Before we proceed, I would like first to define each of these words for us.

### 1. Faith

This is a very common word in the New Testament. It (and related words) are used nearly 500 times (489 to be exact). A good way to translate this word, is by using the words, "faith, trust, and belief." That is what "faith" means. It means a trusting, believing, or depending upon something else (in most cases, it means a trusting in God).

Faith is an act of dependence. Imagine an underwater diver or an astronaut. They both must trust their equipment for their survival. If they don't trust their equipment, they will be terrified. Some people are terrified of riding on airplanes. They are terrified because they don't trust the planes. Faith is a placing of one's trust in God and what He has said.

In the case of these Thessalonians, Paul describes their faith as being "toward God!" Literally, you might translate verse 8, "in every place your faith, that is, the faith you have toward God, has gone forth." Paul said that what was spreading abroad was their faith that they had in God, rather than any struggles in their lack of faith that they might have.

Paul will write a few chapters later, "We night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith" (3:10). But what does Paul mean when he said that he wants to come and "*complete* what is lacking in your faith." (3:10). Certainly, the Thessalonians had saving faith. They were true followers of the lamb. We have looked at several verses that would affirm this. Paul spoke of their work of faith in 1:3. Paul said "we were comforted about you through your faith" in 3:7).

But, Paul said that something was lacking. It may be that the their faith was somewhat like the boy's father, who said, "I do believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). But what was probably lacking was merely some things in the realm of knowledge and practice. In chapters 4 and 5, Paul will continue with exhortations pertinent to continuing to "equip" and "strengthen" their faith. In chapters 4 and 5, Paul will address the issues of sexual purity, loving one another, what happens to those who die, what the Lord's return will look like, and various other practical helps. I believe that these Thessalonians were young and immature, and mostly untaught about certain things. It is those things that Paul will complete in their faith (i.e. chapters 4 and 5).

We did receive insight into their faith when we were in Acts 17. Let me remind you what Luke wrote concerning Paul's stay in Thessalonica. Paul was explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah!" (Acts 17:3). Their faith toward God was a faith in the Messiah. Their faith toward God was a faith in a redeemer and deliverer. He was the One who would redeem them from their sins. He was the One who would "deliver them from the wrath to come" (using the verbiage of 1:10).

Their faith was in "the gospel of God" (as mentioned in 2:8,9). "We imparted to you the gospel of God" (1 Thess. 2:8). "We proclaimed to you the gospel of God" (1 Thess. 2:9). The "gospel of God" is the good news of God that though we have failed to live for the glory of God and face the judgment of God, Jesus Christ came as the Messiah to die on the cross for our sins. His righteousness has become ours and we stand complete in Him! Their faith was in this gospel. Their faith was in "the word of God's message" (as mentioned in 2:13), which is none other than the gospel preached by Paul and Silas. These Thessalonians had placed their trust in God the Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ.

We have spoken about what the first element of true conversion is (faith). Let's now look at the second element of true conversion: turning.

### 2. Turning

The Greek word for turning is the word, *epistrefw* (*epistrefho*). This word is not as common as the word for faith. Yet, it is still used a good number of times in scripture and there is no doubt as to its meaning. It means "to turn." It can be used "literally," or "metaphorically." Literally, it is used in the following texts:

Mark 5:30 - "And immediately, Jesus, perceiving in Himself that the power from Him had gone forth, **turned** around in the crowd and said, 'Who touched My garments.'"  
Matt. 24:18 - "let not him who is in the field **turn** back to get his cloak."

Far more often, it is metaphorically, to describe the turning of one from his sins to follow God. (notice how often it is turning from one thing and turning to another). Consider a few of its usages:

#### Turning to the Lord

Luke 1:16, 17 - "And he will **turn** back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God. And it is he who will go [as a forerunner] before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to **turn** the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous."

Acts 15:19 - (James says) - "Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble (with circumcision) those who are **turning** to God from among the Gentiles."

#### Describing conversion

Acts 9:35 - "And all who lived at Lydda and Sharon saw him (the paralyzed man, who could now walk), and they **turned** to the Lord." (i.e. were converted).

Acts 11:21 - "And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed **turned** to the Lord" (i.e. in Antioch).

2 Cor. 3:16 - "But when a man **turns** to the Lord, the veil is taken away."

#### A Gospel Invitation

Acts 3:19 - KJV - "Repent therefore and **return**, that your sins may be wiped away."

Acts 14:15 - "Men, why are you doing these things? (worshiping Paul and Barnabas) We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you in order that you should **turn** from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them."

This last passage is especially appropriate for us in understanding 1 Thessalonians, because Lystra was just like Thessalonica. In Lystra, they were idol worshippers. They worshiped Zeus, Hermes, and the rest of the Greek pantheon of mythological Gods. And when Paul told them to turn from these vain things (i.e. NASB note says "i.e. idols"), he told them to turn to the living God. The Scriptures often compare and contrast the living God with the dead idols. (see Psalm 115 or Jeremiah 10 or Isaiah 44).

Our God is a living God. He is a God Who speaks and acts and has authority. He is a God Who can really effect things with His will. Idols are dead. Buddha is dead. Next time you see a Buddha at a Chinese restaurant, say, "Buddha is dead." God is alive. He sits in the heavens and does whatever He pleases!

You notice this same thing about 1 Thessalonians. Perhaps you passed by these words before. "You turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God." Like Paul admonished those at Lystra to turn from dead idols to serve a living God, so Paul describes the Thessalonian conversion in the same way. This living God is alive and well. This true God is in contrast to the false gods who were "mere shams and empty shows."

But what were these idols like? The best way to understand what sorts of idols were in Thessalonica would be to look at other cities during that time. We already mentioned Lystra. Remember Athens? At one point, Paul described things in such a way as to lead us to believe that idols were all over the city! (Acts 17:22-23). In Corinth, it is little different. Paul wrote about the idols, "You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to dumb idols" (1 Cor. 12:2). Furthermore, he spends three chapters teaching about idols (1 Cor. 8-10). In Ephesus, so many conversions were taking place that "Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis," felt that his business of idol making was in jeopardy. Demetrius said, "You see and hear that non only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable number of people, saying that gods made with hands are no gods at all. And not only is there danger that this trade of ours fall into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis be regarded as worthless and that she whom all of Asia and the world worship should even be dethroned from her magnificence" (Acts 19:26-27). Those in the Galatian region were at one time "slaves to those which by nature are no gods" (Gal. 4:8). The world during the time of the apostle Paul was saturated by idols and idol worship.

Now these idols came in a variety of sizes. Some were small. Some were large. And lest we think that in our sophisticated world of our, we have escaped these idols, think again. In the Chicago-land area, there are Hindu temples that contain many idols - many of which are considered to be living being by the sadhu's who take care of them.

Oh (you say), "but Steve, we live too far from any of them." Well, perhaps we aren't in danger of worshiping shrines anymore, but we certainly do have other idols we are in danger of worshiping. We certainly are in danger of chasing after the god of mammon - ever pursuing the mighty dollar. We are in danger of pursuing the Baal's of our day. As Alistair Begg has said, "Foot-Baal, Basket-Baal, Base-Baal." We are in danger of pursuing accomplishment and prestige. We are in danger of pursuing our own pleasures - a nice care, a nice home, a nice family, a nice dog, a nice lawn, a nice garden, a nice fence, a nice interior, a nice kitchen, a nice playset, a nice computer, a nice guitar, a nice ...

J. C. Ryle defines idolatry as "the honor due to God is turned aside from Him, and bestowed on that which is not God." A. W. Tozer called idolatry, "the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him." God once came to Ezekiel, the prophet, and told him, "Son of man, these elders of Israel have set up their idols in their hearts." (Ezek. 14:3). And that is the issue, church family, we have "idols in our hearts?" Is there anything that will prevent us from following the Lord our God, "with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength"? If so, we will be guilty before the Lord of idolatry, ever as much as the Thessalonian believers. If so, we need to repent of these things. We need to turn like the Thessalonians did!

We have been looking at the elements of true conversion. John Piper spoke about both of these elements as always accompanying each other: "Conversion, ..., is repentance (turning from sin and unbelief) and faith (trusting in Christ alone for salvation). They are really two sides of the same coin. ... You can't have the one without the other any more than you can face two ways at once, or serve two masters. ... This means that saving faith in Christ always involves a profound change of heart. It is not merely agreement with the truth of a doctrine. SATAN agrees with true doctrine (James 2:19). Saving faith is far deeper and more pervasive than that" (Desiring God, p. 48).

We see that in the ministry of Jesus. These two elements are often found together in the scripture: Mark 1:14-15, "and after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.'" And if, indeed, these two elements are essential to true conversion, they must also be an essential ingredient in our gospel presentation. That is what the apostles did! They clearly preached repentance. You merely need to take your concordance and look up repentance and you will find that ...

- ... it was the first and primary message of John the Baptist.
- ... it was the first and primary message of Jesus.
- ... Peter preached repentance.
- ... Paul preached repentance.
- ... They all preached repentance and faith, and so must we!

Believers in Russia are called "Repenters." They all talk about when they "repented from their sin."

## **2. The results of true conversion (Service and Waiting)**

The two results of true conversion are stated plainly as infinitives (i.e. those words that have the word "to" in front of it. Infinitives are "to go," "to walk," "to speak," "to stand," ...) So here, the results of true conversion are two: To serve and to wait.

### **1. To serve**

The Thessalonians saw themselves as servants to God. God had graciously forgiven them, and now they are servants to Him. Jesus said it like this, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it. For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matt. 16:24-26). To follow Christ is to forfeit your life. To forsake it. To give it up!

It is a fearful thing today, that many people view the gospel today as a "fix-it" message. Preachers say, "If you believe the gospel, God will bless your life!" (Which is true, but the blessing comes as a by-product, not as the goal). They say, "Do you want to have a good marriage? Believe the gospel and you will. You want to have good children? Believe the gospel and your children will improve. You want help with your personal problems? Believe the gospel and you will be helped in your problems." Though there is some degree of truth in all of these, the core of the problem with each of these is that the gospel becomes a means to receive blessing from God. In other words, when you believe to get from God, you have it all wrong.

The Biblical view of the gospel is that we change our allegiance. We no longer serve ourselves, but we now serve God. Paul wrote, "We have been delivered from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of His beloved Son" (Col. 1:13). See, when the Thessalonians turned from their idols to serve God, it wasn't to their benefit (see 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14ff). In fact, when the Thessalonians repented, their life got worse, not better! Suddenly, they were being persecuted and mistreated because of their new-found faith in God.

The good-news of Christ coming to die for sins isn't self-serving, it is God-serving. It proclaims His grace (To the praise of the glory of His grace - Eph. 1:6). It proclaims His glory (He makes known the riches of His glory - Rom. 9:22). We are not saved to receive from God. We are saved to serve God and give Him glory. And that is what the Thessalonians did! "They turned from idols to serve a living and true God!" (1 Thess. 1:9). And this will always be the fruit of repentance - service to God!

### **2. To wait**

The Greek word here is *anamenw* (anameno), which means, "to wait with endurance." The picture here is not one of waiting around for a bus. The idea here isn't that the Thessalonians are going to sit back and wait for Christ to return, as a man would recline while watching a ball game. Though some did do this. But Paul admonished them in the second epistle to get to work (see 2 Thess. 3:6, 10-12).

The picture here is one of waiting with endurance. "Looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. At the ascension, the disciples were told, "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:9-11). This is waiting and longing for final redemption, "for the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God" (Rom. 8:19). The chorus of angels in heaven and the redeemed saints long to give glory to God who will come from heaven.

At this point, Jesus is seated at the right hand of God, waiting for His enemies to be made a footstool (Psa. 110). He is waiting. We are waiting. He is patient, waiting for all to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). But, there will be a day when His waiting is over. And when His waiting is over, our waiting will be over. Let's look for that day!

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