

What is "Conversion"?

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[0 : 0 0] is conversion. What is conversion? Conversion is one of those words that we use frequently and these are the kind of words that we're looking at mostly on this short series of studies. But what do we mean by conversion? We know generally how we use the word but actually when you come to look at its meaning precisely it's not all that easy sometimes to actually find a definition of conversion that is satisfactory. What is it to be converted? How do you know if you're converted?

How do you know that a convert is in fact a convert? What sort of things about that person convinces themselves or others that they are indeed truly converted? Well the essential meaning of conversion first of all if we turn to the scriptures one of the things that's surprising in a sense is that when you turn to scripture and look for the word conversion or convert it's not very often used.

If you look at a concordance and look up the word conversion you'll find there are just a few verses in the whole bible that contain the word conversion. And when you do look up the meaning of it in the original languages of Hebrew in the Old Testament, Greek in the New Testament they come pretty much to the same thing. The main word for that in the Old Testament, Hebrew and New Testament, Greek is in fact to turn around. It means to turn round, to turn back. That's the essential meaning of the word that's mostly translated with conversion in English. And that is the essential meaning of it, to turn round, to turn back.

In other words you can see that conversion in its meaning has an overlap, a considerable overlap with the word repentance which means also to turn around or to turn from one thing to another, from sin to God. We've looked at the definition of teaching on repentance a number of times. And there is a considerable overlap but you couldn't really confine the meaning of conversion to the same thing exactly as repentance. Because conversion takes you a little wider than what repentance is. And essentially you'd have to say that repentance is really within conversion or attached closely to conversion. But actually conversion is more than repentance strictly speaking in itself. So what is conversion? What is the meaning?

What is this word that means to turn around or to turn back? What is the theological or spiritual meaning or intent of the word of God giving us that word that we translate conversion? And is it right for us to use that word as we use it with regard to a person's life and how that person has become a different person to what they were? Well it is of course. Because conversion essentially means conversion is the turn about of life. A turning around of a person's life and lifestyle. Conversion is all that is included in a person coming to be different in outlook, in practice, in behaviour, as we'll see in every aspect of their being, in their thoughts inwardly and so on. All of that is part of their conversion. A person who is converted is turned around from where they were and going in the opposite direction. That's why it's so close to the idea of repentance. You know it's like when you, and most of you have a sat nav in your car when you use it, for example, a place you don't, usually you use it in a place that you don't, you're not very familiar with so that you can follow it as it specifies what you do when you come to the next roundabout or the next set of lights or whatever. And sometimes when you make a mistake and you take a journey, a branch or a side road or whatever, that's not the one intended on the sat nav. You get this voice annoyingly saying to you, recalculating, recalculating. And sometimes it says, do a U-turn as soon as it's safe.

[4 : 22] Well that's really essentially what repentance is of course, and that's essentially what is conversion as well. It's the life of a person doing a U-turn. It's the life of a person who has come right roundabout and in that turnabout has become a different person.

Now of course it's important to connect conversion with other important things in our salvation or in our experience of salvation. Because conversion is not strictly speaking something we produce ourselves, although in fact at many times in the Bible you'll find the word converted or conversion used as something that we are instructed to do.

And Israel were many times commanded by God to return, to return, to turn around. And while that involves repentance on their part, it also meant that they were to make a turnaround. That they were to see to it that their lives, having gone astray, were to actually come back in the opposite direction. Back to God, back round to face God, to serve God, importantly again.

But reconversion actually is something that logically follows from regeneration. That's another big word. We'll maybe look at that one as well in more detail. But regeneration, as you know, is God bringing us to life.

Ephesians chapter 2 is one of the great chapters that reminds us of what this is about. You who were dead in trespasses and sins. That's us. That's what we are. That's us, you know, our natural state in our sin, in our lostness, in our relationship with God, turned away from God.

[6 : 19] You were dead spiritually, spiritually dead in trespasses and sins. And you very ones, Paul is saying, who were dead in trespasses and sins, you has he brought to life in union with Christ.

You has he quickened, has he made alive, has he brought to life. That's regeneration. Regeneration. And the immediate result of regeneration, when God brings a person alive, when he brings them from deadness to life, the immediate result of that is that person is converted.

That person is turned around. And then following on from that conversion, logically, as you put these things together, regeneration, followed by conversion, that's the outcome of it.

And that itself is something that contains within it, and you like all these other things, faith, repentance, all the other things that we associate with a new life, and the actings of a new life.

They are all there from conversion onwards. From the moment a person is regenerated, and therefore comes to be converted, that is how God is involved in it.

[7 : 31] That's how we come to be turned around. That is how we come to return to God from his work of regeneration. That's the Holy Spirit's work.

But from that moment that that person is regenerated by God, that person comes to turn, to be converted, to be again facing the right direction, whereas previously they were going away from God.

So the essential meaning of conversion is that. It is to be turned around. It is to have that turned around where you come through being brought alive by God, to come from one direction to its opposite.

From one way of life to its opposite. And that leads to the second thing we're going to look at, which is from this passage itself. Well, you can see that, of course, in the passage here as well.

You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God. There you see is the idea of being converted. These Thessalonians, that is the effect of God's grace as it came into their experience, into their lives.

[8 : 42] And the work of God's Spirit, as he goes on to speak of that, or previously as well, you became imitators of us, for you received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit.

The work of the Spirit applying the word of God powerfully, savingly to them resulted in them being converted, turned from idols to God.

So then, secondly, what is the evidence of being converted? What is it in this passage that gives you the evidence that a person is converted? If we're looking at ourselves tonight and asking, how do I really know that I'm converted?

Am I just thinking it? Am I mistaken about this? How can I really be sure that I am converted? And especially for the younger ones, and the younger ones in the faith, these things are important.

That's one of the primary reasons we're looking at these topical studies, that we can look at things that are themselves actually very important issues in our lives as believers, but also realize where they fit in along with others, so that that will add to our growth, which is essential to grow as Christians in our relation with God and with each other.

[10 : 02] So what's the evidence of being converted? There are three very important points in the passage that gives you what we might call the evidence of conversion. There is, first of all, God's word being accepted.

You notice what he's saying here, God's word being accepted. In verse 4, you have it there, that the gospel came to you, not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

In verse 6, the beginning of there you became imitated from us, you received the word in much affliction. And we sang Psalm 19, which really fits in with this.

The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul, or that can also be translated quickening the soul, bringing the soul to life, reviving the soul.

But here is Paul saying to the Thessalonians, this is how we know that you are a changed people, that you are a converted people, because firstly, we know that you received the word of God.

[11 : 14] There were people who accepted the word. And when it says here that they received the word in verse 6, to receive the word of God is far more than just to say about it, well, I know it's different to other words.

To be able to say about it, it's special in a sense that it is, in many respects, it is superior to other philosophies or other words.

To receive the word, as far as Paul is concerned, these Thessalonians received the word, which meant they accepted it as the truth. Receiving the word of God is in fact giving obedience to the word of God, as God's given truth to us.

Peter says something very similar to that in his first letter, verse 22 of the first chapter. Now that's a very similar expression, though there are one or two other details in that that we could look at some other time.

But being born again really is pretty similar, and comes alongside of to be converted. Because conversion, being born again, these are all at the very beginnings of a new life.

[12 : 44] And it says there, Since you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.

The only quotes from the Old Testament, For all flesh is as grass, but the word of the Lord remains forever, and this word is the gospel, or the good news, that was preached to you.

So there is an essential evidence or element that provides evidence of conversion that God's word is accepted. But you see, he's saying, You received the word in much affliction, with joy in the Holy Spirit.

They didn't receive the word without having something difficult in relation to that. They received the word in much affliction.

We don't give obedience to the word of God, and accept it as the truth of God, and place our lives along with it, in order to live by its terms, and think that that's going to be a pretty easy way of life.

[14 : 00] To be a Christian in Thessalonica, or in Corinth, or nowadays in Syria, or in Afghanistan, or a converted Jew, that is difficult.

We have it easy, relatively speaking, compared to these sort of circumstances in the life of believers elsewhere in the world. But they received it in much affliction.

Conversion is still prepared, is being still prepared to accept God's word, knowing the consequences, knowing that it's going to lead to challenges, knowing that it's going to lead to difficulties, knowing that people are not going to actually accept us the way we once used to accept us, that we don't go to the pub with them anymore, that we stop doing things that we once did with them.

And even if they remain acquaintances, they're not really in the sense of friendship, in the same sense as they once were, as we share things together with people, that we cannot do anymore once we're converted.

That doesn't mean you turn your back on them. That doesn't mean that they have to see you, or that you have to try and convince them you're superior to them, as a human being, none of that.

[15 : 18] But they will see that you are not what you used to be. That your life has a different direction to it. That you have different priorities.

That you're prepared to follow this path, even though it's going to mean at times that it's very difficult, and you have to put up with things for the sake of Jesus.

God's word is accepted. That's the first thing. But it's not simply a relationship with God's word that's set up in our conversion.

The relationship of the convert is not just to God's word, though there's a very important relationship to God's word. And that's why the Bible becomes so important in the life of a person who's converted.

Because, as Peter put it, it's through the word that we're converted. It's through the word that we continue then to be fed and directed and taught. But our primary relationship is not with the word, but with the God of the word.

[16 : 28] In fact, when you ask another question along with what's conversion, you really have to ask, well, what is Christianity? That's a big question, and one that has so many answers nowadays that would take you aback how some people would actually answer what is Christianity.

But Christianity is not following a set of rules, though there are rules to it. It's not a series of do's and don'ts that we have to keep, though there are do's and don'ts that we have to keep in our Christianity.

Christianity is a relationship with a person. Because Christianity, essentially, is about Christ. That's why it's called Christianity.

Christ is at the center of it. Christ is on the peripheries of it. Christ is in the middle of it. Christ is at the foundation of it. Christ is at the top of it. Christ is all through it.

It is Christianity. And as Christians who follow the teachings of Christianity, we do so because we are following Christ.

[17 : 40] Because we are in a relationship with Him and with God through Him. And therefore, our primary relationship through the word of God is with Jesus Himself, with God in Christ, if you like, who has become our Father in Heaven spiritually through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Mediator.

And that's why sometimes you hear people describing conversion as when they were converted to Christianity. Christianity. And that's perhaps used of people who may be coming from confessed atheism or from another religion or something like that.

They may be brought up as Muslims or Hindus or whatever and they were converted to Christianity. And we're not saying that that definition is wrong. But it's not enough.

Because there's more than being converted to Christianity. When you came to no conversion, when your life was changed, you didn't just come to be converted to be attached to a Bible.

You came by conversion to be attached to this person of Jesus Christ. You came into a living relationship with God. You turned, as the Thessalonians were told, you turned from idols to the living God.

[19 : 05] You became people in relationship with God Himself through His Word. So, the second thing is God's Word is accepted but secondly, God's way is adopted.

God's way is adopted. God's way of salvation. God's way for us to live as His people. All that you might say is in God's way whether it's the way of how we are saved, the way of pleasing Him, the way of looking forward to the future, the way of relating to other people, the way in which we view the world, God's way is adopted.

And that's the second evidence that a person is converted. That's what He's saying to the Thessalonians. You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.

The Thessalonians were pagans. Paul, of course, started preaching in the synagogue in Thessalonica which was his practice in all of these towns and very soon the people in the synagogue refused his message and it was the Jews there, those belonging to the synagogue who stirred up the strife in Thessalonica so that after a relatively short time he had to leave that city and move on.

It was a main city but he had to leave it and move on. But he left a legacy behind him where Gentiles came to be converted and formed the church in Thessalonica. They were pagans to begin with.

[20 : 42] They were idolaters. They said all the idols that were current or in vogue at the time but they turned their back on these. They turned around from them to God.

You turned from idols to serve the living and true God. then you see that's what you and I are as well. I'm an idolater by nature and so are you.

You don't have to have little images in your house to become or to be an idolater. C.S. Lewis somewhere says that when he used to hear Christians using the phrase and thinking of other people who were unrepentant sinners, you have to hate the sin but love the sinner.

And he says for many, for quite a while I used to think that that was just simply not sensible, that there was no sense to that. How can you possibly hate what a person does but love the person themselves?

But then he says I began to think about it and I realized that I actually knew such a person whose actions I really did hate but as a person I loved him.

[21 : 59] And he said that was myself. I used to hate some of the bad thoughts I had, he said. I used to hate some of the things I did. I knew they were wrong but I loved myself.

And so do you and so do I. We love ourselves. We are in love with ourselves. That is really at the core of out-being what is wrong with us.

That is why Jesus so very strongly and vehemently said, if any man will follow me let him deny himself. Let him take what is in himself.

Let him take this love of self. Let him become other than an idolater who worships himself. Who follows himself. Whose own thinking is really what's important.

Whose priorities are those of himself and of herself. If any man will be my disciple, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. That's what the Thessalonians did.

[23 : 07] They gave up their idolatrous ways. Their being in love with the idols because that was their own way. They took up God's way instead. And conversion is a turning from self because as sinners we're turned in upon ourselves.

We think well of ourselves. We don't like people telling us that actually there's something in your life spiritually that you need to deal with, that you need to cut out of your life, that you need to have changed.

If you've got a part of your body that's bruised or really hurt or a growth or something there and the doctor or the surgeon comes along to put his finger on and probe it and says ah yes we're going to have to deal with that.

It's sore. You don't like that happening and people don't like it. When the gospel actually points, if you like, God's own finger and puts it on the sores, on sin as it's shown up by the law of God, by the gospel, by the teachings of the Bible.

But then you see that's how God turns a person around, that's how God comes to regenerate. He doesn't actually tell you, well you're alright, you need to just spruce yourself up a wee bit, but essentially at the core of your being you're actually alright, you just need to fit things around that and adjust a few things in your life and you'll be on your way and you'll be alright.

[24 : 39] No, God says, yes, you think the house you're living in is actually great, I'm telling you it's a homily saying, you think your inside is really spectacularly good, but I'm telling you it's detestable, God is saying, it's despicable, it's filthy, and if you want to be one of my disciples, you have to be converted and become us little children, what does that mean?

It means you have to see that God needs to dismantle this house of ours and build another one for you instead. I think it's C.S. Lewis somewhere else who says, that's what God does when he comes into your life, you think he's coming and he is in fact coming initially destructively to pull down the things that we have built.

And you realize he's building a much bigger house than you thought, because he's going to live in it himself, and in fact he's not building a house at all, he's building a palace.

Where he's going to live, that's conversion, that's where God's way is adopted, where God comes to show us that our own way as we're turned in on ourselves. It's no use to him.

It's his way, or our way, but not both, and not in between. So conversion is, as he says, the turned from idols to serve the living and true God.

[26 : 05] And of course that, as we said, involves priorities and relationships. The whole person is turned in conversion. Your mind is changed. Your affections are changed.

All aspects of our thinking and our actions are changed. Not just what we do, but why we do it. Because it's a renewed person.

And of course, that doesn't mean that a convert is perfect. And this sometimes perplexes people. And we have to use the teachings of the Bible faithfully and pastorally in putting them to ourselves and in seeking to proclaim the message of God from the truth.

Doesn't mean that in our conversion we come to be put in a situation where we'll never again fail. Where there will be nothing much wrong with our lives from then on.

There are days when the Christian life is a slog. when your Bible is not the first thing you pick up in the morning. When you realize you've gone through quite a bit of the day and you haven't prayed.

[27 : 22] Perhaps you go more than one day without praying. When your heart comes to be cold and you look in on yourself and you realize that your appetite for the word of God is not what it used to be.

Does it mean you've never been a Christian? Does it mean you're not converted? No. There are times when we do go back to reluctance and to feeling coldness of heart and when we find that it's not as easy to pray as we'd like or as we used to find it.

There are periods like that in our Christian life. There are winters in the Christian soul. That doesn't mean that that person is not a believer, has never come to be a believer, has never been converted.

But neither does it mean that we should look upon these things with some kind of just letting them go as if it wasn't really important.

It doesn't mean we shouldn't be concerned if we find that these things creep into our lives. But the fact that they're there does not mean we've never been converted.

[28 : 48] Because although they're there, your head is still in the right direction. Because you realize that you need to keep facing God. God. And although at times the reading of the Bible is not as regular as it used to be, or as it should be, and these other things we mentioned also, you know that nevertheless you need to keep God in your mind, and you realize that God is there and he will not go away.

We're told that when salmon swim upstream, that they always keep their heads upstream as living fish.

And whenever you see a salmon coming upstream, if that stream or if that river is really flowing full force, there are some times when you might just catch a salmon if you can see them, and they are being pushed back a bit by the current, but they're never in a situation where their head comes to face downstream, and the water is carrying them that way, because they'll drown very soon, and they'll die.

And it's like that with the believer as well. There are times when the force of the stream of our own innate sinfulness, and the stream of the world, and the stream of temptation is so strong as you're battling against it, you feel that sometimes it is moving you back a bit, but you keep your head upstream.

You keep your head upstream because you realize the moment you turn away from God, and you turn back from God, you're finished. You will drown in your sin like a salmon.

[30 : 29] And if you see a salmon being carried downstream, with its head facing downstream, that's a dead salmon. There's no life in it. And the believer, the convert, that's backslidden, may be at very many times very difficult to tell from a person who's never been converted, maybe even to themselves.

But God still maintains the person's head facing upstream. They'll never come to the point where they'll die.

Simon, Simon, Satan has desired to have you, that he may sift you all as wheat. But I have prayed for you. But your faith does not fail.

And when you are converted, you see, conversion is more than once in your life. Repentance is more than once in your life. There are times when you need to turn around again when you've gone and slid away from God and come back again to face him.

When you're converted, strengthen your brethren. When you're recovered. when you're back on your feet spiritually. When you're again solidly in the way of God.

[31 : 57] Strengthen your brethren. God's way is adopted. And although Job was very perplexed at times, and even came to express that he wished he had not even been born, that his day of birth was a day of woe, woe.

Nevertheless, he kept his head upstream. And in all his sufferings, he kept the way of God. Nevertheless, he said, he knows the way that I take.

And when he has tried me, like gold I shall come forth. I have not departed from his way, from his words. I esteem them more than my necessary fruit.

What is it that really proves that a person who is perhaps feeling very, very weak spiritually, well, he doesn't put the word of God aside altogether, even if it's just a nibbling compared to what it used to be.

That person will never say, this is a Bible I no longer need. I have no more use for it. It's a person whose word is accepted and for whom God's way is adopted.

[33 : 18] And thirdly, conversion means that God's son is awaited. You turn from idols to serve the living God and to wait for his son from heaven.

Conversion brings belief about the things of eternity. If there's one thing that characterizes a person who is thoroughly worldly, who has no time for conversion, who doesn't believe in conversion, it is that that person is absolutely committed to time and only to time.

There is nothing beyond time. All the things of time are there to be enjoyed. Everything that's in this world and in that person's life and all its dimensions, if he or she so chooses, that's what life is about.

Let's eat and drink and be merry for tomorrow we die and when we die, that's it. But when God comes into your life and when your life comes to be turned around, when through regeneration you come to be converted, then you really come to believe in eternity.

You come to believe there's such a thing as life beyond this world and beyond the grave. You come to believe there are things like the wrath of God which we have to contend with in his judgment.

[34 : 48] If we are not in Christ then it's going to be in our own merits that we face it. That's what Paul is saying. You turn from idols to serve the living God and to wait for his son from heaven whom he raised from the dead.

Jesus delivers us from the wrath to come. A person who is converted is conscious that there is a wrath to come.

A person who is converted is conscious and increasingly is aware of the fact that the wrath to come will always be a wrath to come for those who are lost. There will never be anything else but more wrath to come.

After millions of years in eternity it's still wrath to come and more wrath to come. But we have been delivered he says.

This Jesus who has delivered us or delivers us from the wrath to come. Conversion is delivery from wrath. Conversion means coming to await God's son from heaven.

[36 : 01] As he puts it in Philippians we are citizens of that place. from heaven we await or eagerly expect the saviour the Lord Jesus Christ.

A convert is very conscious of being on a journey. A journey that doesn't terminate in the grave. A journey that he knows is far greater than this little slice of time that we have from birth to our death.

A journey in fact that never ends. A journey that has a beginning for us in our conception in the womb. But it never ends because we go to eternity.

And that's why you've got such great works of spiritual teaching as the pilgrim's progress. why has the pilgrim's progress fascinated people for so long?

Why has it been a best seller from the days that Bunyan produced it? Because people deep down realize that life is a journey.

[37 : 24] And there's a fascination about the way that Bunyan actually described this journey. And even if people don't accept what he's saying in terms of describing the journey, they're still fascinated by the fact that here is a person who leaves one place convinced that it's going to be destroyed.

This Christian, this person in the pilgrim's progress, and passes through all of these adventures and all of these experiences in his journey as he goes on, until finally he comes to the place that he looked forward to, the celestial city, the terminus, the place which his conversion took him towards, and which he is now ready to enter.

it was a struggle at many times, and yet here he is, this struggling believer, this man who fell in the slough of despond, this man who had to face so many enemies on the way, this man who sometimes even despaired of himself, this Christian, there he is, and he's arriving at the gates, and he's received and welcomed, a convert, coming to glory, that's what you are as a convert, you come to await God's Son, you believe in eternal things, you know as Augustine put it that you were made for God, that he made you for himself, and that you can find no rest, until you find you rest in him.

And you notice, that's what Paul picks up in chapter four, assuring these Thessalonians that those who had died, those who had gone on, were no longer living in this world, that they were not going to lose out if the Lord should arrive, while the other Thessalonians were still living, because he said the Lord will come, the trumpet will sound, and the dead in Christ will rise first, then we who are alive and are left will be caught together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord, therefore encourage one another with these words, because you'll come across many people in your own experience who will say to you, rubbish, who's going to believe in that today, these things were believed, these concepts of people going up into the air, and Jesus Christ coming down out of heaven to come back for his people, they were believed in the days of Paul, but science has disproved all of these things, we don't believe in these things nowadays, what is Paul saying to it?

Comfort one another with these words, these are the truth, the words of truth, not the truth so called, of ideas that contradict the gospel, and that's what converts do, not only do they look forward to the coming of Christ, but they comfort one another in the meantime, they strengthen each other, they help each other as travelers, as people who have accepted God's word, who have adopted God's way, who are awaiting God's son, you are converts to Christ his place.

[41 : 18] Lord, our gracious God, our heavenly Father, our blessed Redeemer, we give thanks as we come this evening to worship you, and to close our worship, we give thanks for the reality of conversion, that it is not a figment of our own imagination, that it is not an invention of human beings, that it is not something that we produce ourselves through a change in our own thinking.

We thank you, Lord, that our conversion is attributable to the work of your Spirit, bringing us to life. We thank you that our conversion brings us to know things as they really are, and that you give us in it a mind that is fixed upon your truth as we find it in your word.

We thank you that you have given us that hope that longs forwards to eternity, that believes in eternal things to be fulfilled when you come to fulfill them.

We thank you, Lord, that in our conversion we have planted within us that desire to look towards your coming, so that as we relate to you now in a personal relationship, Lord, you know that we desire and long ultimately to be with you in an eternal relationship and glory.

Bless to us your word, we pray, and forgive us now. For Christ's sake, Amen.