

Converted to Serve and Wait for Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, we're going to look at the final few verses of this chapter, so we can read at version number 9, for they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we have among you, and how you turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come. We're going to round off our short series of studies on conversion, which we've been looking at for a number of weeks from both Old and New Testaments, and we've been concerned to look in the Scriptures at the accounts we have of some of the conversions that you find mentioned in the Scriptures, the conversion of individuals that are brought out to us in various circumstances with different emphases. And we've seen the different kinds of emphases that come across to us as we look at these conversions, different backgrounds, different kinds of personality, different circumstances in life, and so on. And the aim that we have been looking at this, as well as any other aspect of the Bible's teaching, is that we ourselves will be converted people, that we will indeed know something of that experience of conversion, taking account of all the differences and all the different emphases that we've seen in it, and some more of what we'll see this evening. But that's the aim really we have, isn't it, in studying the Bible and coming to read it for ourselves and coming to listen to it preached as well. Whatever topic we're looking at, we're applying it to ourselves, and we are putting it to ourselves so that we will be like these people that are mentioned, the ones that we've seen in these conversions. How do we know that we're converted? Where do we look for evidence of conversion?

Because that's really primarily how we want to round off our series of studies, to look at these questions, how do I know this, and what is the evidence for it. Now we've seen something of that, of course, on the way through as we've looked at these individuals, but tonight we want to try and summarize it as we look at this passage in Thessalonians, because it is really a brilliant summary of what conversion is about in a very brief compass, though of course there's much more to it in other parts of Scripture that you could add to. But this is really such a good summary and a rounding off for us of what conversion is about, and how we come to see evidence of someone who is converted and where that evidence is found in our lives individually. First of all, conversion is what we can call a turnaround. Notice how the apostle here speaks about what happened in regard to these Thessalonians when they responded to the gospel. This is the report that had gone out by various people, those who were witnesses to what had happened in Thessalonica. They were reporting even back to the apostles themselves concerning us, the kind of reception that we had among you, how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and through God. And we'll look at some of the detail of that in a minute, but focus at the moment on this turning, because that's essentially what conversion is. It's a turning, it's a turnaround, it's taking something that's facing in one direction, a person facing in one direction, in a particular direction, under sin, under the influence of sin in a fallen state, and coming from that to turn around, to do a U-turn spiritually and morally, so that we end up facing God and in his service. That's basically what he's saying. You turn to God from idols to serve the living and through God. And that's what you find in the individuals we've mentioned, just to pick out one or two very different personalities, but that's essentially what you find. Manasseh, for example, in the Old Testament, he was such a wicked person. He filled Jerusalem with blood in his reign, as he caused so much havoc and so much devastation and had so many people put to death. It was just a terrible time. It was an awful tyrant. But then, as he was brought as a captive to Babylon, he actually turned to the Lord. He sought him in his time of distress and was found of him.

You find the same with Rahab. She came to know the Lord in a very different way. The news of the people of Israel's advance through the wilderness and the overcoming of the kings of Moab and Bishon there. That news had reached Jericho, and she took that on board, and she did what we'll see later in our study tonight. She believed that word, and more importantly, she believed who this God was, and what this God was like that was at the head of these people as they came through in their journey in the wilderness. She had come to know this God, she said, is the true God. We know this now, that this is who your God is. And you could say the same about Paul, and then the jailer, the Philippian jailer, and Lydia, whose conversion was such a gentle thing. The Lord opened her heart as she listened to the word being proclaimed by Paul and his companions there where she was. And in all of these things, you can see the variety. You can see the differences. You can see how much one of these people differ one from the other. And yet, in one respect, they are all alike.

They all have in their own way this turning in their lives to God. This turn around, this coming to change direction, this coming to have a U-turn, where they actually came to a new way of life, to a new outlook, to looking at things differently to what they once did, and coming especially into the service of the living God, as Paul puts it here, to the Thessalonians. Now, there are three points that I really want to mention in relation to that, the fact that conversion is a turnaround. And these are three important points. Remember, we're doing this in summary, so just very briefly. Conversion is brought about by God's power, yet it is we who turn to God. Conversion is brought about by God's power, yet it is we who turn to God.

We didn't look at some of the theology behind conversion. For example, the regeneration that takes place through the power of the Holy Spirit when God brings a person to life. That's really the origin, if you like, of conversion. Or you might say conversion and the turning around of the person is the outcome or the result of that regeneration, that bringing to life spiritually of someone who was dead in trespasses and sins, is how Paul puts it to the Ephesians. You who were dead in trespasses and sins, you has he quickened. He's brought you to life. And what's the outcome of that bringing to life?

[7 : 34] On the part of God, it is our converted. Our life has changed. Our conversion, our life has changed. We come to turn into a different and a new direction. Maybe very gentle, like Lydia, it may take place over a process of time so that we can never really put our finger on the exact moment, the exact point at which it happens. But one thing the convert can always say is that whatever inability they have to explain what's happened or when it's happened, they know that they're not what they used to be.

That they're a different person with a different outlook on life and on eternity and on God and on his service. And you see, that's why when you come to the Scriptures and the appeal of the Gospel, the appeal of the Gospel is not to our ability. It's to our responsibility. You see how often in the Bible and through the Gospel as it's proclaimed, God is saying to us, believe. It's an imperative. He's saying, repent. It's an imperative. He's saying, turn to me, it's an imperative. It's something that addresses our responsibility. He's addressing us as people who ought to turn to God, who ought to believe, who ought to place our confidence in God, who ought to turn around and face a new way. But we cannot do it ourselves. And that's why we look to God for the enabling, for the ability that comes to help us meet our responsibility. So that when the Bible and the preaching of the Gospel and your own reading of the Bible says to you, God saying, turn to me, believe in me, trust me, your response to that and my response should be, Lord, please give me the ability, give me the strength, give me the power. Carry out the enabling so that I will be converted, so that I will have the life that I need to have the hope that I need to have the outlook that I need to have for time and eternity. You see, it's brought about by God's power. And yet it is we who turn and we who are called upon by God to turn to him. That's the balance that the Gospel brings us, that the teaching of God's word brings us. The second thing is that conversion is a once-for-all thing, and yet we can have many conversions. Conversion is brought about by God's power, yet it is we who turn. Conversion is a once-for-all conversion, and yet there can be many conversions in our experience. Now, what do we mean by that?

We mean by that that there's a point in our life, for most of us at least, where we are aware of God working in our lives or things happening, so that it's a beginning of a new life, it's a new step, it's a new chapter. It's conversion in that sense that it's the first conversion, it's the first turning to God. And that's a once-for-all thing. It carries you into a new relationship to God.

But then in that new relationship, there may be many times when we need to come back to God, having strayed, having wandered, having lost our appetite spiritually, having lost our way spiritually.

And you have no better example on that than Peter himself. You remember that Jesus said to Peter in Luke chapter 22, where you find this described by the Lord to Peter, that Satan had desired to have him so that he might sift these disciples as wheat. He was looking to use Peter as a door into the fellowship of the disciples, so that Satan would then do his sifting work amongst them and cause great upheaval. And of course, that tells us that we must be on our guard individually and not give Satan the opportunity to use us as a door into the fellowship of God's people. But what did then, what did Jesus then say?

[11 : 50] He said, I have prayed for you. He said, I have prayed for you. Oh, this is the case. I prayed for you. Something that was already complete. He didn't say, I will pray for you when this happens. He said, I have prayed. It's done. I prayed for you so that your faith does not fail. And when you are turned round again, or the AV has, when you are converted, strengthen your brethren. Peter had been converted previously, had come to know the Lord. He'd started following the Lord. He was a disciple of the Lord.

He was a saved man. And yet there he was, the Lord saying to him, when you're converted, after this lapse, after you've gone astray, by which he meant especially his denial of the Lord three times, strengthen your brethren. Now, we didn't look at that aspect of conversion. In all of these conversions that we looked at, the main emphasis was being converted from a state of sin and lostness into one of salvation, conversion in the sense of coming to know the Lord savingly. But then there is this aspect of conversion, and this may be applicable to myself tonight and to you, as we stand here before God. How is our relationship to God? Is God calling you back tonight and calling me back tonight from a situation where we've let things slip? Is he calling you back from coldness that set into your heart and your relationship to him? Have you slipped in your Bible reading? Are you growing slack in your prayer life?

Are you coming to really find yourself with difficulty over commitment to the saving of the Lord, to coming regularly to the prayer meeting, to all the things that you know are associated with the feeding of your soul and in your personal relationship with God? Are you in need of being converted? Are you in need of, like Peter, turning back again to God? Here's God's appeal to us through the gospel tonight, that if we are in ourselves, if we know that we have gone somewhat back in our relationship with God, well, God is saying to us, that can be actually fixed. Come back to me, turn to me. I'm waiting here for you.

Just like Peter did. He followed the Lord at a distance. And yet the Lord restored him. He came back to the Lord. He was once again converted. And what Jesus said to him was so eminently true in his life. When you're converted, strengthen your brethren. Peter learned from his laps.

That's the great thing about God. He allows us to learn from things that ought never to have taken place. He doesn't hold it against us and say, well, that's it. You had your chance. You're done. I rescued you once. I'm not going to rescue you again. That's not the kind of God we have, but a God who is full of compassion and of mercy.

[15 : 02] And it was not going to throw us away just because we have a lapse here and there. It gives us no excuse for the lapses. And it doesn't give us any sense of self-confidence to say, well, that's it. I know I'm going to be all right. I can just take it easy now.

We're saying this because God addresses us in his word as one who is so abundant in pardon, who is willing to receive us back to himself.

So it's brought about by God's power, yet it is we who turn. It's a once for all conversion, yet we can have many conversions in our life spiritually.

And thirdly, it's the individual who's converted, and yet we are converted so as to belong to a spiritual family. It's the individual who's converted, yet we're converted so as to belong to God's people, to that spiritual family under God.

You see, sin, as you well know, sin is what causes this terrible individualistic view of life. That we're in charge of our own life. That we're in charge of our own destiny.

[16 : 13] And as you look out over society and listen to what people are saying, and what people actually report on television, and how things are actually put across to us in terms of the philosophy of life that people live by, you can see by and large there's really pretty much what I think best, what I think of my life, what I think of God.

I'm free to think as I like and to act as I like. Who's in charge of my life? I am. I'm the captain of my soul. That's what sin has done to us. And it's not somebody else's sin. It's my sin, and it's your sin.

And we need to be rescued from that, and it's by conversion, through the power of God, that brings us this outcome of conversion. That's what rescues us from that terrible, individualistic, proud view of ourselves and of our ability.

And sin is overcome by conversion to this extent in this life, that we come to be incorporated into the people of God. You see, there's something far wrong if you find a person saying, well, I'm now converted, but I don't need to belong to a church.

I don't need to bring myself to be part of God's people and of the fellowship of God's people. Because everywhere in the Bible where you find people converted, their concern is to belong to God's church, to serve God in this church, to worship God with others of like mind.

[17 : 45] So conversion, yes, it's the conversion of an individual, but he doesn't leave you isolated. And you find, of course, that that's really what is standard throughout Scripture.

When you come to know God as your God, then you come to know God's family as your family, as your people, as Ruth said, when we saw Ruth's conversion, how there's not much about it, but we noticed how she came to know the Lord through Naomi, her mother-in-law, and then when the challenge came, was she going to go back to her own people or go to Naomi's native land, Bethlehem, Judah?

And don't appeal to me to leave you. Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your God shall be my God, and your people shall be my people.

That's what conversion brings, a sense of belonging to the people of God. It's not about denominations. We're not talking about the differences between one congregation and another, or one denomination and another, but it's the conviction that when God comes into our lives by his power to convert us, to bring us to know himself, then we are concerned to know ourselves, and to own ourselves, and to confess ourselves, to belong to the people of God, wherever it is we're set, and wherever we worship him.

And that follows through into a lot of other teaching that we have more time to go into. For example, we want, as God's people, when we're converted, to actually have every facility that's open to us to make known that that's who we are.

[19 : 37] We owe it to God, to come to confess him, to come to follow through with all that we have in the church that brings to us more advantages than we presently have, to feed our souls, to witness for him.

We're individuals, converted individually, but it's supposed to belong to God's family. So there's the turnaround. That conversion is brought about by God's power, yet it is we who turn.

Once for all conversion, yet there may be many conversions in our experience between now and our time of leaving this world. And it's the conversion of us as individuals, but it's so as to belong to a family.

And secondly, that's conversion, a turnaround. Where's the evidence for it? What kind of things does the apostle say here, along with this emphasis on turning to God, where's the evidence that shows that they have indeed turned?

What is it that makes it clear that that's what's happened? Well, three things. First of all, God's word is accepted. God's word is accepted. Look at verse 6. You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit.

[21 : 01] And then if you turn the page to chapter 2 and verse 13, you can see similarly how Paul is saying there in verse 13, we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God which is at work in you believers.

Now notice what he's saying. This word of God which you heard. And Paul's emphasis is especially on the preaching of the word, the declaration or the proclamation of the word.

They didn't come to be converted. They didn't come to know that change coming about in their lives by educating themselves into it. It wasn't something that came through mystical means such as meditation.

It wasn't something that came through music. It wasn't something that came through education. Nothing wrong with music. Nothing wrong with education. You can actually have your mind lifted superbly by music, particularly by music that is based upon the teaching of God's truth.

There's nothing really better to impress you surely musically than Mendelssohn's great oratory of Elijah. Magnificent rendering of spiritual truth and gospel truth through music.

[22 : 20] But that's not Paul's main emphasis. Good though that may be for us. This word that you heard that was declared to you that was proclaimed by himself as a preacher of the gospel.

That's how they came to receive the word of God. And you see what he's saying in chapter 2 you received it not as the word of men but as what it really is the word of God which is at work in you believers.

Why are we concerned that people would come and join us say next week but anytime. Why are we concerned that people would come and join us in worship here under the gospel and especially to hear the gospel proclaimed because that is God's primary means to this very day for bringing people to know himself for working in their hearts for showing to them themselves and himself for opening up their minds to what their need really is and where that need is answered in Jesus Christ.

Yes God can work in the life of an individual who's never been to church never heard a church service church sermon has never heard the gospel proclaimed yes God can work in that person's life sitting on their own at home even if they're not reading the Bible.

God's not limited to church attendances but let's always remember friends where God specifies his primary means for various things that he accomplishes and his primary means for influencing people's lives is his word and especially the preaching of the word the proclamation of the gospel a gospel that goes out and calls us to turn to God and then feeds our souls once we have turned to God.

[24 : 19] So he's saying that's the first evidence God's word is accepted and of course that means that they gave obedience to that word. Now he's saying here as in chapter 2 that you received it not as outward but as the word of God as it is indeed you just can't imagine that he's saying that without knowing that they gave obedience to the word.

Now as Peter puts it in his first epistle where he talks there about the gospel and about his own proclamation of the gospel as well where he's writing to those people in his first epistle and where he says in chapter 1 and verse 22 having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love.

Love one another earnestly from a pure heart since you've been born again not of perishable seed but imperishable to the living and abiding word of God and this word is the gospel the good news that was preached to you he's bringing it all together isn't he?

And in Thessalonians that's exactly what Paul is saying you accepted the word but you do notice you received the word of God in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit and with joy of the Holy Spirit.

Conversion is not about bringing us into a context of special sort of good feelings.

[25 : 55] I don't mean by that that we don't come to enjoy what we have in Christ but I mean good feelings in the sense in which the world speaks about good feelings and having a buzz.

It came to you in much affliction is what he says. The gospel causes pain you can't come to know yourself and your need as a sinner without some pain in your heart and your conscience but here is God's answer to it joy in the Holy Ghost a different joy altogether to the kind of joy that you have in a worldly life.

Joy in the Holy Spirit deep seated joy lasting joy a joy that's really if you like a foretaste of the joy of heaven. that's how you receive the word in much affliction yet with joy in the Holy Ghost.

It's amazing how God enables his people to know rejoicing a deep rejoicing which they can't explain properly even in times of affliction but that's how God is and that's what he does.

So that's the first thing God's word is accepted. Secondly God's way is adopted. You notice here he's saying you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.

[27 : 20] Of course Thessalonica was a pagan town a pagan city a place that had many gods in that sense of paganism and pagan worship and that's what they were actually delivered from or turned from.

They turned from their idols to serve the living God. And our society is full of idols. Our society is just crammed full of idols.

Our lives have idols in them. My heart has an idol and it's called myself. And we all have some elements of idolatry about our persons and our practices.

But the world as we know it in its lostness is especially characterized by idolatry not just in religions that are false religions as the Bible calls them and it's not embarrassed to call them that.

It's not ashamed to call them that because that's what they are. The religions that do not give a place of prominence and priority to Christ and to the Trinity that God is.

[28 : 35] The Christian gospel and the Christian worship that we're engaged in. But along with all of that you have the gods of money of sex of entertainment of worldly pleasures of all of these things that our society is crammed full of idols.

And we have to recognize that they are idols that people's lives are dominated by them controlled by them that they bow down in their presence you don't see them doing it physically but mentally that's what's going on in their minds they're enslaved to these powers that's what their priority in life is to serve these powers to serve these gods what is it about idolatry that's most significant or what you might say is what is the worst thing about idolatry well it's not the harm that you might say it does to the person who's engaged in it that's not the worst aspect of idolatry at all the worst aspect of idolatry is that it robs God of the glory that belongs to him which is why all the way through the Bible and the Old Testament especially God emphasizes I am the Lord I will not give my glory to another to graven images or whatever it might be he doesn't share his glory in that sense with any rival which is why he denounces idolatry of whatever kind in such a severe and definite way when

Paul was in Athens as you read in Acts chapter 17 as he was waiting for his companions he took a look round the city and he was moved he was deeply stirred within his soul because he saw that the city was full of idols and what really hurt him and what really got to him and what really moved him inwardly was not the damage that that was doing to these Athenians though he of course considered that what he was concerned for was the way that it spoiled God and his reputation and his honor and his glory and gave that to other objects and even to human beings instead of God himself and that's still how it is as you look out over that world in its lostness as you look at those people that we would seek to reach out to with the gospel and would love to have under the preaching of the gospel what is it that you feel when you look at their idolatrous lives ask yourself that question let me ask it of myself tonight is my main concern their condition is my main concern what they might actually be doing to themselves well if it is we're not putting this concern where it should be the concern for the glory of

God the concern that God is being robbed of his rightful glory in the lives of human beings most of us will have learned our catechism and it begins with that dynamic question what is the chief end of man which really is just a way of saying why does man exist what's the purpose of his life man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever not just to glorify God but to glorify God and enjoy him forever because the two things are twinned together we don't enjoy God unless we glorify him unless the priority in our life is to glorify God don't think of enjoying him our life has to be fixed up and put right with God through

God's power and through our conversion in order to have a right relationship with God established then our concern and then our privilege is to glorify him and to enjoy him and that's the dilemma for you tonight if you're not converted you're robbing God of his glory you're taking away something of his prestige in terms of your relationship with him you're not giving to God the honor that is due to him you're keeping it back from him you're giving it to someone else even to yourself and God doesn't like that why should he he created us for himself for his glory for his honor for his praise and the greatest event in our life is our conversion when we are turned when we turn to

[33 : 41] God and when we find we store that priority of glorifying him and enjoying him that's the second thing God's way is adopted but of course that brings serving God as well we haven't time to go into that our time's gone you turn to God from idols to serve the living and through God we turn from our own service from that prayer to serve the living and through God to serve him that's his way so there's God's word is accepted God's way is adopted and thirdly God's son is awaited now you notice there are two things attached to this turning and the purpose for this turning just look again at how Paul puts it because we've divided it up and it's important to keep it together how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and through God and to wait for his son in other words along with the serving of God is the waiting for his son from heaven the two great prongs if you like of the outcome of conversion or the purpose for why we turn to

God to serve him but also to wait for his son from heaven well when we come to accept the Bible God's word for what it is as we've said earlier we don't just accept parts of it we don't just jettison or get rid of the and I can accept most of what the Bible says but I can't accept what it says in Genesis 3 or Genesis 1 in creation and I can't accept what it says with regard to the reality of hell the everlastingness of hell as well as heaven we either accept it all or we don't accept it we can't pick and choose and one of the prominent features of the New Testament is its emphasis on the return of Christ his second coming and the judgment of the world at that coming to serve the living

God and to wait for his son from heaven waiting is a believing anticipation of this great and final climactic event where Jesus in his glory will appear and every single person who ever lived will see that and will relate to that one way or another either with this anticipation eager longing whatever words we use to describe it fulfilled when he comes or with sheer terror knowing we're not ready to meet him but it's not going to do anything to his coming one way or the other that is absolutely sure and certain and fixed converted people are we still in need of conversion whether we've had one already or whether we've never had one let me read these verses in conclusion if our

Lord should come tonight come as king and judge of all are there any here assembled who would tremble at his call is there one oh is there one far from Jesus and the light unrepentant lost undone if the judge should come tonight are we watching are we waiting in the raiment pure and white should we joy at his appearing if our Lord should come tonight Christ as king and judge will come it's recorded in his book he will bid us stand before him not a soul will he overlook are we ready everyone are we in the raiment white if the judge of all mankind should appear this very night are we watching are we waiting in the raiment pure and white should we joy at his appearing if our Lord should come tonight let's pray Lord our

God we know that there are so many solemn aspects to your word and we know that your emphasis on the wrath to come is one of those Lord help us to believe it help us to prepare for it help us to be in that situation where we would not be subjected to what that wrath contains we thank you that you have already taken that wrath for your people and we thank you that by trusting in you and coming to know of that life of conversion we thank you that that is a certainty for us that that wrath will not overtake ourselves bless to us your word again this night we pray continue with us now as we sing our final praise and all for your glory sake in Jesus Lord Amen let's sing in conclusion now from Psalm number 9 Psalm number 9 we're singing on page 9 of the

[40 : 17] Psalm books that's the Psalm version I'm singing verses 7 to 11 the Lord forever reigns on high his throne for judgment stands he'll judge the world in righteousness with justice rule the lands to verse 11 sing praises to the Lord who sits in Zion on his throne among the nations of the world proclaim what he has done these verses as we stand to sing the glory forever reigns on high his throne for judgment stands he'll judge the world in righteousness with justice rule the lands the

Lord will be a hiding place for those who are oppressed and he will be a strong defense on low to our distance on those who know your name oh Lord in you their trust will place on you do not abandon those who seek your gracious names sing praises to the

Lord who sits in time on his throne among the nations of the world proclaim what he has done I'll go to this side door here this evening after the benediction and now may grace and mercy and peace from God the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit be your portion now and ever more Amen