1 Thessalonians - Commentaries by William John Hocking

Conversion to God, Conversion to God: Part 1

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Notes of an Address on I Thessalonians 1:9-10

“For they themselves show of us what manner of entering in we had unto you; and how ye turned 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, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.”

I suppose that there is hardly another passage in Scripture which gives us such a clear and definite presentation of Christian conversion as we find in this First Epistle to the Thessalonians, and especially in the first part of it. By comparing the Epistle with the Acts (17:1-10), which gives us the history of the apostle’s visit to Thessalonica, we find that his labors there were very short. But his service was evidently blessed of God, and blessed of God in this particular sense, that the work of conversion in the men and women of Thessalonica was short and sharp and effective.

The work was not of slow growth, but the word of the gospel came upon them irresistibly, and revolutionized their whole life and conduct, so that they became absolutely different persons in conduct and demeanor from what they were before. The change was so rapid, and so pervaded their whole being, that the eyes of all could not but discern that some marvelous work had been wrought; and every one of these persons became in consequence a living witness of the power of God’s gospel in men’s lives. The gospel worked in a way that no doctrine, no philosophy had done or ever could do. Here were Gentile men, immersed in heathen darkness and blindness, men degraded by the impurities of heathen worship, visited by a certain man who preached the good news concerning Christ and His work; and the immediate effect of the preaching was that they abandoned their lifelong worship; they abandoned all the dark practices of their lives, and heaven’s light began to shine out from them.

The effect was such that, as you heard in the verses I read to you, not only throughout the city itself, Thessalonica, but throughout the two provinces, Macedonia and Achaia, the news had spread like wildfire. The gospel of God had been at work in Thessalonica, and there were well-known persons who were completely changed in their lives by the acceptance of that gospel. Anyone could go to Thessalonica and see these converted persons, and watch them in their daily lives. They could listen to the words that came out of their mouths, and they could ask themselves, ‘What has done this? What is the cause of the change? What explanation is there of this wonder?’ And men were asking such questions throughout Macedonia and Achaia.

Thus the word was being sounded abroad through the converted, so that the apostle could say, ‘Our work here is taken away from us. It is not now necessary for us to preach the gospel in this district, seeing there are men who are living it. Here are men who, in every step of their ways, testify to the fact that they are now in living touch with God above, and that a power has entered into their hearts and lives, and is enabling them to travel in the reverse direction from that which they had hitherto followed.’

This is a grand testimony, beloved friends, of what real conversion is. We do find, through the grace of God, instances of it still—multitudes of such instances—and we can only earnestly pray to God that these numbers may be multiplied. There are other multitudes watching these examples. And we should remember that there is not a more effective witness for God in this dark and sin-stained earth than the heavenly life of a man, woman, or child in this world. Men then see what God’s grace can do for a sinful person.

Paul was called to speak of what the gospel had done in Thessalonica; and what it had done there, he knew could be done elsewhere. It was the great work of his life to go into Satan’s strongholds, and to make known there the ways of life and salvation, and it gladdened his heart to see these shining lights in Thessalonica, showing out the bright glories of Jesus, the Savior of men.

Now, I wish to bring before you one or two features of these verses. You will notice how very comprehensive the verses are of true conversion. The apostle speaks, in the first place, of what the gospel had done for them He says, (1) “Ye turned to God from idols.” This was one important fact: but this was not all. I have referred already to the past of their lives. It is not sufficient that there should be such a change, but there must be some Person before them who becomes the Director of their lives. Thus he speaks of them (2) as serving a “living and true God.” But there was a third item. They not only turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, but, as to their future, they were waiting “for his Son from heaven.” And thus, you see, that in this short passage the Christian life is, as it were, portrayed in all its aspects: with regard to the past, with regard to the present, and with regard to the future. And this is stated of those who answers in this remarkable way to the description of true Christian conduct—and these were recently-converted persons in Thessalonica.

Well, we ought to seek to come up to the standard that is given us in the word of God, and to this exemplification of the standard, which was so striking, so far as the Thessalonians were concerned.

In the first place, then, the apostle speaks of their definite turning to God from idols. We can hardly conceive what a revolution this was in the case of these persons. We must think of them for a moment as they were before they heard the gospel. They had given up to idol-worship the higher and nobler part of their nature—the spirit that was within them, given to man in order that he might have to do with God above. But the Thessalonians bowed down to gods of gold and silver and stone; while, behind these idols, there was the power of the wicked one, drawing them away from God. They gave all their best to that which was false, and to what affected their morals and their whole nature. What a man worships, he becomes in character. The man who worships darkness and evil becomes dark and evil and brutal himself. And it was so in Thessalonica. And we can realize the power of the gospel of God which brought these heathen to the knowledge of a living and true God, and to the hope of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Let us not think only of those who were so far away from the light, and so far removed in character from the persons amongst whom we are. We are in a highly-favored land, where the knowledge of God is spread abroad by means such as were never known in apostolic days; and the “knowledge of God,” as the Bible declares it, is made known thereby in an outward way, so that one can hardly pass through life without receiving most of the facts of divine history. But, how terrible when, in the face of this privilege, the allegiance of the heart is still given to something inferior to God, which is, after all, only an idol, since it takes the place of the Supreme One. What is it, beloved friends, that men and women, in our country, are bowing down to? They are giving all that is best in them lo themselves, worshipping self, worshipping the world, desiring only success and ease and pleasure here in the world, and God, thus, shut out of their lives.

Be not deceived; there are many idols in the world. And the apostle John, writing to the family of God, says “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” It is so easy to allow something in the heart, which replaces God, to which we have bowed. You may take an innocent child, so beautiful that the hearts of men are irresistibly attracted to such a picture of unspoiled goodness. You may put your child in the place of God. You may thus displace God. You may refuse to listen to His word because of your idol. You may refuse to obey His call because of your idol. Where an idol, whatever it be, is enshrined in the heart, the result is terrible! There are idols of friends, idols of circumstances, which take possession of the heart, and which stand between the man and God.

Is this so in your case, my hearer? Have you an idol? Have you something in the heart which intervenes between you and God, and shuts out the light of the glorious gospel of God, the all-glorious truth of His word from your life? Flee from such an idol. Let the light of God’s truth shine into your heart and show you that there is nothing comparable with His Son and His Holy Spirit.

The work of conversion mentioned in our text is as much needed now as it was then. The Thessalonians turned from idols to serve the living and true God. Beloved friends, it requires an effort to do this. You will observe that these men turned.’ There was a definite revolution in their affairs. They were proceeding in one direction. They turned, and went the reverse way, and the light of God shone into their hearts.

It is a great achievement to have the heart turned towards God. It is a great comfort to have in this world the sense of this great Heavenly One above, and to know that He is omnipotent, and that He exercises a part in my daily life. How many a man has been brought close to temptation, brought to the very threshold of an evil, deed, and has been arrested by the thought of God!

O beloved friends, never, never seek to exclude God out of your life. The robber on the cross said to his colleague railing against the Holy Sufferer also there, “Dost not thou fear God?” His whole life showed that he had not feared man. But now he says, “Dost not thou fear God.” That man, stricken down with his penitence, feeling the horrible sin that he had committed against God, was brought to confess his sin, and to know that Jesus was the only Savior.

You, my friends, have you been converted? Has your life been turned towards God? Are the heavenly powers of holiness shining down upon your way in the things that you say and do, and in the things that pass through your mind? Is all that concerns you subjected to the Lord of heaven?

A converted man is the man who has turned to God. He has been living with his back to all that is holy and good, and he now turns about, like the man whom the Lord Himself described as going into a far country. By and by, he said, “I will arise and go unto my father.” He arose and went to his father, and, in doing so, he was a converted man. He turned from his profligacy to the father against whom he had sinned.

Now, in the history of every child of God there must have been a moment when the change was made, when there was the passing from darkness into light, from death unto life. Has it been so in yours? In the case of the Thessalonians, conversion affected them so completely that men saw and wondered. Men found that these were now governed by new motives of which they were ignorant. The course of life to which they had been accustomed was the encouragement of their evil passions. Idol worship taught that what a man lusted after was right, that what man wanted to do he might do. Conversion changed all this.

Sin is also a custom nowadays. Is it not thought, nowadays, that you can do what you will? and that if you only strive to do what you ought to do, you will come out safely in the end? Beloved friends, is it true that the man who this is really doing his best, and that the drunkard who reels in the gutter is reeling towards heaven? Such doctrines are contrary to the teaching of God’s holy word. No, you are called to turn from the evil way into the way of light and holiness.

But there is not only the act of turning. There is the conduct that follows, and that conduct, so far as we have it expressed here, is summed up in a very beautiful phrase indeed-they turned to God from idols “to serve the living and true God.” We are told to serve the living and true God. I do not think that these Thessalonians acted in some special manner, and devoted their lives to God in some particular way. I do not think that they gave up their calling in life, and threw themselves exclusively into the service of the propagation of the gospel. I do not think the phrase implies this separation from ordinary pursuits. On the contrary, the Epistle implies that they went on with their work, that they continued in their customary vocation. In the midst of the place and circumstances in which they had been brought up they stayed, only now they worked for their God above. They had found a living and true God, and they had found out the way to serve Him in the midst of their ordinary duties.

Think of it, as life’s aim! To serve the living and true God Is it not, from one point of view, as simple as A B C, doing the will of God, doing daily what He would have us do? And yet, although it is so simple, it is an idea that has not occurred to a great many persons; even some who are piously inclined fail to grasp the fact that the living and true God has a service for each one of us to do. There is a pathway through this world for you and me (for I am now addressing those who are converted)—there is a pathway through this world marked out for every one of us. We have our something to do. We have our words to speak. We have our works to perform. They are such that no one else can do for us. They are such that, if they are not done, the world, our companions, those around us, will be the worse because we fail to do them. God works through His servants, and His servants are men and women who have been saved from the wrath to come. They are those into whom He puts a new nature and His Holy Spirit, and places them here in this world for His praise and glory.

Beloved friends, this is a noble calling. It is a grand privilege to be here in this world to serve God. We look around us. Is it not a fact that, in general, God’s name and God’s will are despised? Is it the principal characteristic of our times that the will of God is honored, and that men systematically seek to know and do it? It must be admitted that even at this moment men are everywhere turning their backs upon God and His word. It is no excuse to say that God is great, and God is holy, while we are so finite and feeble. Man slights his God.

Take, for example, the honor and reverence that is due to this day. This is the Lord's day. Why must it be considered? Because it is the Lord's day, because His name is placed upon it, because it is the day that He has called His own. Is there a fear of what is due to Him? Is it not a fact that, just at the moment, when a great firm publishes a new Sunday paper, its circulation leaps at once to a million and a half or so? Is there that reverence of God's word, and of His name, and of what is due to Him that might be expected in a Christian country?

Dear friends, it is a great thing to serve God, but what does the term mean? It means that what I do and undertake must be entirely under the guidance and direction of God, and that I must have the sanction of His word for what I do and undertake, and that, in all my doings, I must fear God, reverence His name, and render unto Him what is due to Him.

Let us each in our measure seek to establish in our lives the fact that we are serving God. And when people inquire, 'Why do you not do this?' let us say, 'I serve God. I fear God. I have His word. I tremble to disobey that word, I fear to do wrong to Him. Knowing His will, I tremble to disregard it.' It ought to be so. These Thessalonians had found the living and true God, and were serving Him. Do not think this is bondage. It is the joy of liberty. The man who has the true God in grace before him feels that he can never do sufficient; that what ever self-denial he may make, it is unworthy to be mentioned; that God's grace is so great, the sacrifice of the cross for him was so infinite, that anything he may renounce is but trifling.

Are you, then, living for God, or are you serving yourself? Have you an idol in your life? Perhaps you started on the new path in past years; you have still to make good your profession, and to serve the living and true God. There is a reason given in our verse why we should not slacken, and take holidays as it were, in the service of God. Why is this? The Thessalonians were told by the apostle to brighten the future of their lives with the hope of the return of God's Son from heaven. It must have been a tremendous revelation unto these men to hear that God's Son determined to visit this world again!

Once He visited it in His humility and grace. He came down, that mighty and holy One, and was found here in human form. It was a wondrous visitation that He, the Prince of peace, the Lord of glory, should be here as a man! Men saw the "Godhead glory shine through that human veil." One man, you remember, said, "Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation." It was a wondrous visitation, that the Son of God should tread this world without a place to lay His head, until He laid it down in death on Calvary's tree! It was indeed a wondrous visit.

But it is equally wonderful to learn that He who came once will come again. And these men were called out to wait for God's Son from heaven. He was coming again. And how did they know this? Who could unveil to-morrow and say what would be in the future? They had the truth from the best of all witnesses; they had it from the Son Himself. Before He left this world, He gave a promise to those He left behind Him. When He was in the upper room, and the little company of disciples with Him, their hearts were filled with grief because they learned that He whom they loved was about to take His departure.

[W. J. H.]

(To be continued)

Conversion to God, Conversion to God: Part 2

The Lord recognized the love that made them feel sad; He recognized the love that wished Him back and craved for His presence. He, therefore, said, "If I go away, I will come again, and receive you unto myself."

Dear friends, a great promise was that! It brought them joy and hope. These men at Thessalonica heard it also. They heard it from the lips of the apostle. They drank in its sweetness and comfort, and said, 'Oh, what a glorious thing it will be for Him to come back here from His glory,' and they forgot, as it were, the difficulties and trials of their path through this world in the vision of hope that the Lord would return and receive them to Himself.

They heard also the angelic testimony to the disciples when they stood on Mount Olivet gazing up into heaven, where that beloved One had vanished from their eyes. They stood gazing up into heaven waiting for the cloud to open, and thinking He would return immediately; but the angel spoke to them, and said, "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven." "This same Jesus!" It is the blessed Person Himself who is coming, the Person who bears in His hands and feet the marks of the nails! This is He whom the Thessalonians expected, and whom we, too, expect. That same Jesus shall come-not some bright vision for your deathbed—not something for your imagination—but no! that very Person who suffered here shall come back. This is a promise, the truth of which we cannot deny, for the Lord has said it. Can it be a fact that a man whose sins have been washed away in the precious blood of Jesus—can it be that a person for whom Jesus died on the tree, does not care to cherish the hope of His coming again?

Some persons think it is a doctrine for those who are well instructed in the word of God; that it is a doctrine for persons who have studied, for instance, the visions of the wondrous Book of Daniel—that it is especially for such. But the Thessalonians knew nothing yet about Daniel's prophecies. Did they know anything about Daniel even? Here was the simple fact, that some idolatrous people had turned to God, and were ignorant of divine revelation. They had turned from lives that were absolutely devoid of heavenly truth, and. they learned from the servant of the Lord that Christ would come from heaven.

We also have that word. Let me ask, What are you waiting for? Are you waiting for His coming? Waiting, I take it, means anxiously expecting. You will remember that those virgins who went out to wait for the Bridegroom slumbered and slept. Could they then be said to be waiting for the Bridegroom? How could they be waiting for Him? They were not even ready for Him.

Do you say, "My Lord delayeth His coming," or is it a fact that you are affected by the scoffers that are around us, who say "Where is the promise of His coming?" But that promise was made nearly two thousand years ago. Then we are nearly two thousand years nearer the fulfillment of it! Beloved friends, if you love the Lord Jesus Christ, you will surely love His word, and He says "Surely I am coming quickly." Wait

for Him, then. Walk on the mountains, and look out for the Bright and Morning Star. “The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and the trump of God, and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air: so shall we be forever with the Lord” ({vi 29620-29621}1 Thess. 4:16,17). What a comfort this hope contains. Are you waiting for the Son from the heavens, even Jesus who has delivered us from the wrath to come?

There is a sad side to the future revealed in these words. Not only is the Son coming from the heavens, but the wrath is coming. The wrath of heaven is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness, and the Executor of that wrath is Jesus, our Deliverer. He has delivered us from the wrath to come. The believer expects the Lord Jesus to receive him into the bright mansions above, but the Lord is also coming to execute judgment upon all. God, who passed over the days of ignorance, now commandeth all men everywhere to repent. Why? Because He has appointed a day in which He will “judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained: whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.”

O beloved friends, it is a grim outlook for this world; for the world can look forward to nothing but God’s wrath. The unrighteousness, the disregard of God’s holy word and will, must receive God’s judgment by and by. God is holy, and He waits in longsuffering mercy, not willing that any should perish; but there is a limit to this longsuffering. This guilty world in which we are is stained by the blood of God’s Son. It is true this blood speaks better things than that of Abel. It speaks of mercy and salvation to the sinner, but God’s justice and holiness demand that the crucifixion of that just and holy Jesus should be avenged. The world stands guilty. Dear friends, all has to be answered for in a day that is coming. It is for you to come now to the refuge that God has provided, to believe on His Son, and to wait for His Son, that you may be taken away from this world before God’s judgments break upon it. Men shall say “Peace and safety,” and sudden destruction shall come upon them. As it was in the day of Noah, so it will be in the days of the Son of man.

Beloved friends, these are established facts, resting for their truth upon God’s holy word. They are there. Search the Scriptures whether these things are so or not. If they are so, heed them, make them part of your lives. May the light of them shine upon your pathway, and great shall be your reward now, greater still in the day which is to come.

I ask you, on which side are you? What is the rule of your life here in this world? Is God’s Son governing your life Are you ready to lay anything on one side for Christ’s name? Oh, beware of rejecting anything that you know is God’s will. Every person who has turned to God from idols finds that very shortly, he must come to a decision. He has to obey God and give up something to do so. He has to break some tender cord, perhaps, for God. This is often a great struggle, and you have to bring yourself to face the naked truth, and ask yourself, ‘Whom shall I obey?’ Shall I obey God, or shall I obey someone, perhaps, who is dearer than all the world beside

Friends, to decide rightly in a question of this kind, you have to look at it from the right standpoint. Be on the side of God. Be on the side of truth. Let this holy Book be the standard for you, that to which you refer, and that which is your guide to obedience from day to day. May God bless the truth and light of His holy word! May the scripture we have considered have a deeper and fuller effect than ever before upon the hearts and lives of everyone present here this evening!

(Concluded from page 816)

W. J. H.

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