

True Conversion

Genesis 29:9–20, 1 Thessalonians 1:2–5

This was the first of Paul’s letters. Last week we looked at verse 1. We had three points: *from an apostle, to a church* and *accompanied with blessing*: we learned that this is an inspired letter from an apostle personally called by Christ, the only man in history to rise from the dead, never to die again; it comes to us with the authority of Christ himself. It was written to a church. God did not give the Holy Scriptures to individual men and women with no connection to the church. He did not put the Bible into a library somewhere where people could read it and decide for themselves what it means. Rather, he gave it to his church, to be used in the church’s teaching and worship. This letter is accompanied with blessing: “Grace to you and peace.” Here are blessings that come from the Father and the Son, through the empowering of the Holy Spirit, enabling us to live for his glory. Such is our inheritance as God’s people!

Today we begin the body of the letter: “We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father.” What a delightful word picture! Wouldn’t we love for the apostle to describe *our* church that way! Here is a description of true conversion—of men and women whose hearts have been changed by the Holy Spirit of God. Remember, the church in Thessalonica was made up of ordinary men and women who had fallen in our forefather Adam, when he ate the forbidden fruit and brought guilt and condemnation upon his whole posterity. Here in Thessalonica were men and women born in sin and capable of all kinds of unspeakable evil: theft, murder, rape, kidnapping, marauding (that is, roaming in search of things to steal or people to attack).

Since the fall of man, this world has been a dangerous place. The first child ever born—Cain—became a murderer who rose up and slew his own brother in anger. Before the flood, “the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” He was sorry that He had made man, and he said, “I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth.”

Members of the church should not think that we are better than other people. Paul reminds Titus that we who belong to Christ were once “foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another.”¹ All of us must be on our guard, lest hatred turn into murder. This past week the nation was shocked when a deranged man, a sergeant in the U.S. Army Reserve, who this past summer had been committed to a mental

¹ Tit. 3:3

hospital after acting erratically and “hearing voices and threats to shoot up” a military base, opened fire with a high-powered rifle in a bowling alley and bar in Lewiston, Maine, killing 18 innocent people and wounding 13. The shooter was later found dead from a self-inflicted gunshot.² Oh, how the heart of God is grieved, for, as Scripture says, “blood defiles the land, and no atonement can be made for the land . . . except by the blood of him who shed it.”³

Truly, as our Confession states, the unregenerate man, because of Adam’s fall, has “wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as, a natural man, being . . . dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.” But “when God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, he [frees] him from his natural bondage under sin; and . . . enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good.”⁴ Praise God for converting grace! “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”⁵ Here, then, in our New Testament text, were ordinary people, transformed by grace, enabled by the Spirit’s power to live exemplary lives. Remember, brothers and sisters, the same Holy Spirit is at work within us, transforming us into servants of Christ.

We have three points this morning: true conversion produces: (1) a love for the body of Christ, (2) the fruit of good works accompanying salvation, and (3) faith-filled patience and hope. First, true conversion produces

1. A love for the body of Christ

Our text this morning begins, “We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers.” What a gracious and thoughtful note! One commentator observes that “it was Paul’s practice to begin his letters by thanking God for his readers.”⁶

Paul practiced what he preached. He had said, “Be ye kind, one to another”; here, he was demonstrating kindness. With regard to prayer he had said, “I exhort . . . that . . . supplications, prayers, intercessions, and *giving of thanks*, be made for all men”; here, he demonstrates thanksgiving. How each of us ought to cultivate thankful hearts and live lives of gratitude both to God and to his people! Our natural tendency is to be selfish—to think only of ourselves. As little babies, all we care about is for our tummies to be filled; our mother’s sleep-deprivation is not on our radar. As we grow up, we ought to learn to be thankful. All of us are dependent, to one degree or other, on other people. Paul teaches, “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”⁷ The supreme

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2023_Lewiston_shootings accessed 8-28-23

³ Num. 35:33

⁴ https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_09

⁵ 2 Cor. 5:17

⁶ Expositors Bible Commentary, 1 Thess. 1:2 (PocketBible)

⁷ Phil. 2:4, ESV

example is the Lord Jesus Christ, who did not look to his own interests, but to the interests of his elect people, when he came to earth to die for the sons of men—praise his name!

In this first letter to the church at Thessalonica Paul begins by giving thanks for the believers there. This was no mere flattery, intended somehow to gain Paul an advantage. Clearly, he evidences a love for the body of Christ. He writes, “We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers.” Here was a church that Paul had planted. Luke records the story in Acts 17, where we read that Paul went into a synagogue there and reasoned with the Jews out of the Scriptures, “explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead.”⁸ Some were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks. But there was opposition as well. The Jews were jealous and formed a mob, and attacked the house where Paul had been staying.

The church at Thessalonica was very much on Paul’s heart. Not only did he regularly give thanks to God for the saints there, he also prayed for them. This kind of prayer is called intercessory prayer, that is, prayer to God on behalf of other people. Time spent in intercessory prayer is time spent on behalf of others. Jesus demonstrated this in his high priestly prayer in John 17. He said, “I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine. . . . Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word.” Did you catch that? The night before our Lord Jesus went to the cross, he prayed for us who would believe on him through the apostles’ word. What an act of humility on Jesus’ part! Here he was, going through great agony as he prepared mentally and spiritually for his crucifixion, but his thoughts were not on himself but on those he came to save. He has loved us with an everlasting love. Even now above, he continues to intercede unceasingly, and will continue to do that until every one for whom he died is safely brought home to heaven. Isaiah 53 states that “he shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied”; Christ’s intercessory prayers insure that this will happen.

Paul testified, “we give thanks to God always for you all.” He wasn’t focusing on his career, or his salary, or in making a name for himself; rather, his concern was for the people God had called him to evangelize. Christ was building his church; that was on the Savior’s heart, and that was what was on Paul’s heart as well. Brothers and sisters, we must not read this text and say, “that was very commendable on Paul’s part.” The Holy Spirit is teaching us that true conversion produces a love for the body of Christ. That is what it produced in the heart of the apostle Paul, and that is what it ought to produce in us as well.

⁸ Acts 17:3 ESV

Are you born again? Has the Lord transformed you from a lover of self to a lover of Christ? Do you have a heart for God? Do you long to glorify him with your life? Then, you should be a lover of the church. You should attend church, not only to receive benefit, but to *give*: to invest your life in the service of your brothers and sisters in Christ. Has the Spirit produced in you a love for the body of Christ? Then pray that your love might grow and grow, that you might play a greater and greater role in the lives of your fellow saints. Every individual member of the body is important. True conversion produces, first, a love for the body of Christ; second, true conversion produces

2. The fruit of good works accompanying salvation

Paul continues his letter to the Thessalonian Christians with the words “remembering without ceasing your work of faith [and] labor of love.” “Work” (ἔργον) and “labor” (κόπος) are related terms: *work* is mental or physical effort to accomplish a task; *labor* is work of a more unpleasant or difficult nature. My next-door neighbor loves working on cars. He loves to get his hands on an old Mustang or Firebird and get it running like a top. For him, working on old cars is not labor, but it *is* work. It takes work, but that work is a joy.

Here were the Thessalonian Christians—ordinary men and women, not unique or exceptional in any way. Through the preaching of the gospel they had come to faith in Christ. They believed the Holy Scriptures and acknowledged Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. Their hearts were transformed by the Spirit of God. Born again by the Spirit, they began to do good works out of love for God. Whereas before, they were selfish and self-centered, concerned only for the affairs of this life; now, having come to faith in Christ, they had a new focus: pleasing God. What Paul would later write in Ephesians was playing out in them: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *unto good works*, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” The Thessalonian Christians were saved by grace through faith. That faith did not originate in themselves; it was God’s gracious gift. They did not have to work for it; they simply received it as a free gift from a loving heavenly Father. Taught by the Holy Spirit, they realized that they were “created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”⁹ They gladly performed acts of service that Paul would describe as their “work of faith and labor of love.” They served because they loved Christ. So it should be for us. The love that compelled Christ to come to this earth and save his people should likewise compel us to serve him in this world. We serve Christ by obeying him, by deliberately conforming our behavior to the Word of God. When God says to do

⁹ Eph. 2:8–10

something, we do it; when he says not to do something, we don't do it. Treating our neighbor kindly and respectfully is an everyday "work of faith." Going out of our way to take meals over to a shut-in, or organizing a team to clean debris out of his yard after a storm, is a "labor of love." In both the everyday work of faith and the rarer labor of love the focus is on serving the Christ we love and trust.

In our Old Testament text today there is a fitting example of a labor of love. It is the touching story of Jacob and Rachel. We are told that "Rachel was beautiful of form and appearance," and that "Jacob *loved* Rachel; so he said, 'I will serve you seven years for Rachel.'" Laban responded: "'It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to another man. Stay with me.'" So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed only a few days to him because of the *love* he had for her."

Now seven years is a long time to work for something. Think of working and saving up for seven years to buy something you've long dreamed of having. Think of scraping and saving to get a graduate education, enduring years of eking out a living—just getting by—so that you can have a more secure future.

Jacob worked—actually labored (the Hebrew word is "served"; doing the work of an indentured servant) to pay the bride-price for Rachel. In ancient society a bride-price was money retained by a man's father-in-law to be his daughter's security in the event of her husband's untimely death, or—heaven forbid!—his abandoning her. In the case of Jacob, he served seven whole years, shepherding his father-in-law's livestock, and the text specifically informs us that "they seemed only a few days to him because of the *love* he had for her." Imagine, young men, working hard for seven years in order to acquire a wife! "Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favor of the LORD." Finding the right life-partner, earning her trust and the approval of her family is an investment in your future. A good wife is a wonderful thing; she is a helper and companion, making life more bearable and pleasant for her husband. Actually, in the case of Jacob he served fourteen years in all, because his father-in-law cheated him—but that's a story for another day. Truly, laboring night and day to get the hand of Rachel in marriage was for Jacob a labor of love, because he loved her. She was a beautiful girl, and came from a good home, but even though, as Jacob's wife, she adopted her husband's faith in the true God, she still clung to remnants of idolatry; years later we see her sitting on her camel's furniture hiding her father's stolen idols as he came into her tent to look for them.

Christian, your work of faith should be a labor of *love*—love for our Lord Jesus Christ. None of us knows how many days we are appointed to live on this earth. In the case of the victims of the Lewiston, Maine, shooting, none of them knew, this past Wednesday morning, that their life would suddenly end that very day. Truly, man knows not what a day may bring forth! *Today* is the day to serve the Lord—to

do the everyday work of faith or the rarer labor of love. Are you committed to serve the Lord Jesus Christ? If you are, then you gladly live to serve him. True conversion produces the fruit of good works accompanying salvation. Thirdly, true conversion produces

3. Faith-filled patience and hope

The apostle Paul specifically thanks the Lord for the Thessalonians' "patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father." Note well: the Thessalonian Christians are commended not only for their "work of faith" and "labor of love," but for their "patience of hope." God wants us not only to work and labor, but also to be patient.

Now no one likes to be told to be more patient, especially in the present day. We are so used to pressing a button and getting what we want—and, to be truthful, what we want is instant gratification. Like a spoiled child, we think we know what we want, we want it *now*, and if we don't get it we throw a tantrum. We don't care if people around us are annoyed or inconvenienced, we want satisfaction, and we want it *now*! Read *Little House on the Prairie* and see the hardships our forefathers went through. Most of us know nothing of hardship or want; we live the easy life. We expect to sail through life without difficulty.

The emphasis in 1 Thessalonians is on the return of Christ. Before Jesus ascended to heaven he promised, "if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." Jesus is coming again! That is a thrilling thought for the Christian: "My Lord is coming to take me home to heaven." This is the sincere faith of the church. Yet it has been nearly 2,000 years since our Lord made that promise, and he still hasn't returned. To some degree the church has learned that we are in this for the long haul. Christ has given us a task to do; he said, "Occupy till I come." He wants us to live out our faith and take dominion in his name, overthrowing the forces of wickedness. Yes, we are in this for the long haul. Christ is returning, but we are not to set dates. Jesus said, "Behold, I come quickly,"¹⁰ but "quickly" is relative: is it quickly according to man's standards, or God's?

This letter was most likely written about AD 52—not even twenty years after our Lord ascended up to heaven—and already, Christians were getting antsy. Hadn't Jesus promised to return? Why hadn't he come back already? Some early Christians had quit their jobs and were living the easy life, awaiting Christ's return, but Paul commends the Thessalonian Christians for their "patience of hope." James would exhort us to "Be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. . . . You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand."¹¹ The Christian *does* have hope: we "sorrow not, even as others which have no hope" (1

¹⁰ Rev. 3:11, 22:7, 22:12

¹¹ Jas. 5:7–8

Thess. 4:13). Our hope is *Christ!* Christian, do you believe it? Do you rest in God's sure promise to you in Jesus Christ? He has saved you from your sins by his precious blood. "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" Your salvation is secure.

One more thing: Paul says he remembers their "work of *faith*, labor of *love*, and patience of *hope* in our Lord Jesus Christ." Here are "faith," "hope," and "love," the same three qualities celebrated in the famous "faith chapter," 1 Corinthians 13: "now abide *faith, hope, love*, these three; but the greatest of these is love." Faith, hope and love are Christian graces produced in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. They do not spontaneously arise in the human heart. The unconverted do not have them.

True conversion produces: (1) a love for the body of Christ; (2) the fruit of good works accompanying salvation; (3) faith-filled patience and hope. Let us earnestly pray that our lives be full of them. Amen.