

What Is True Conversion?

Text: I Thessalonians 5 / Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 33

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I Thessalonians 5 begins and ends with Christ's second coming, and that eschatological context shapes all its exhortations. Paul writes, "But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night" (vv. 1-2). The unbelieving world will be caught unaware in sudden destruction (v. 3), but believers are "not in darkness" (v. 4), for we are "children of light" (v. 5). Therefore, we are called to live as such: "Let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober" (v. 6).

Paul exhorts us to wear spiritual armour: "the breastplate of faith and love, and... an helmet, the hope of salvation" (v. 8), for "God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him" (vv. 9-10). The practical fruit of this doctrine is comfort and mutual edification (v. 11), proper esteem for church officebearers (vv. 12-13), and charitable conduct toward fellow saints (vv. 14-15). The chapter concludes with final imperatives that describe the life of the regenerate: "Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks" (vv. 16-18), culminating in the strong assurance that all is upheld by divine faithfulness: "Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it" (v. 24).

This ethical section of Scripture harmonizes deeply with Lord's Day 33 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, which asks: "Of how many parts doth the true conversion of man consist?" Answer: "Of two parts; of the mortification of the old, and the quickening of the new man" (Q&A 88). These two distinct but inseparable aspects correspond to the biblical pattern of putting off and putting on (Rom. 6-8; Eph. 4-5). Together, they form the shape of the Christian life.

The First Part

True conversion begins with *mortification*—a putting to death of sin. Q&A 89 defines it this way: "It is a sincere sorrow of heart that we have provoked God by our sins, and more and more to hate and flee from them." The word itself suggests death: "*mort*," as in mortuary. It relates closely to repentance, but we must distinguish genuine mortification from false imitations.

Tears alone don't prove repentance. Peter wept bitterly after denying Christ (Matt. 26:75), and his sorrow was genuine. Yet Esau, though he "sought [the blessing] carefully with tears," "found no place of repentance" (Heb. 12:17). We must not confuse natural emotion with spiritual transformation. Outward reform is likewise insufficient. Zacchaeus gave half his goods to the poor and promised to restore fourfold (Luke 19:8)—a real fruit of repentance. But Herod "feared John... and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly" (Mark 6:20)—yet later executed him. King Saul likewise deceived many. He was circumcised, held the highest office in Israel, prophesied (I Sam. 10:11), fought Israel's enemies, and made vows. He called David "my son," wept, confessed "I have sinned" (I Sam. 26:21), and blessed him. But it was all external. In the end, Saul consulted a witch and perished by his own hand. His repentance was spurious.

True mortification occurs in the *heart*. The *Catechism* says, "a sincere sorrow of heart." It is not skin-deep, not merely verbal apology. David knew this: "Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts" (Ps. 51:6). Jesus called Nathanael a true Israelite "in whom is no guile" (John 1:47). Sorrow for sin is not grief over embarrassment or consequences. It is not "I feel bad because I was exposed" or "now I've ruined my reputation." True sorrow says, "I have *sinned against God*." As David confessed, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned" (Ps. 51:4), even though others were affected too.

This is what separates true repentance from worldly grief. A man who only regrets being caught, or mourns lost comfort, does not mourn *sin*. But when one sees his sin as God sees it, sorrow flows. David said, "My *sin* is ever before me" (Ps. 51:3). He means: I see it, and God sees it, and I see that God sees it. That is true mortification.

This is why secular society, with its "cancel culture," offers no true repentance. It humiliates, pressures apologies, and grants no forgiveness. Why? Because there is no reference to God. "But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared" (Ps. 130:4).

Mortification also involves *hatred* of sin. It does not minimize, rationalize, or entertain it. The truly repentant say: "I hate this evil. My Father hates it. How could I love what He abhors?" They do not flirt with danger. Joseph fled from Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39:12). The believer flees situations that tempt him. He knows, "If I don't flee, I may fall again." The *Catechism* rightly concludes that mortification means to "hate and flee from them" (Q&A 89).

The Second Part

But conversion doesn't end with sorrow. The second part is the *quickenning of the new man*. Q&A 90 says: "It is a sincere joy of heart in God through Christ, and with love and delight to live according to the will of God in all good works." Just as sorrow springs from the heart, so does this joy. Psalm 51 again helps: David prays, "Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice" (Ps. 51:8). This joy comes from the gospel. The sinner has seen his guilt, and now sees the cross. "My sins are forgiven. I am reconciled. Christ bore my shame." The Holy Spirit produces this joy, and it is even Christ's own joy: "That *my* joy might remain in you" (John 15:11). It is not earthly excitement. It is a life-giving, spiritual joy – a fountain from the throne of grace. As Paul says, "The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost" (Rom. 5:5).

But joy leads to action. The *Catechism* says that the quickened man lives "according to the will of God in all good works." This is no mere sentiment. It is love for God's law, delight in His commandments, and a renewed will. Saul's partial obedience (I Sam. 15) was not enough. The Lord desires *full* obedience: "To obey is better than sacrifice" (v. 22). Q&A 91 explains that good works are "only those which proceed from a true faith, are performed according to the law of God, and to His glory."

This positive obedience is also in I Thessalonians 5. Verse 8 exhorts us to "put on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation." Why? "God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 9). This appointing to obtain salvation is, itself, election. Verse 10 adds: "Who died for us" – that's particular atonement. And verse 24 assures us: "Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it" – that's irresistible grace. The entire *ordo salutis* rests on God's eternal decree.

What does this produce? Paul says, "comfort yourselves... and edify one another" (v. 11). Joy in Christ results in edification. Then follows honour for elders: "esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake" (v. 13). Next, four exhortations for different kinds of people: "warn the unruly," "comfort the feebleminded," "support the weak," and "be patient toward all men" (v. 14). The truly quickened man seeks peace, not retaliation: "See that none render evil for evil... but ever follow that which is good" (v. 15). Then come three striking commands that summarize the new life: "Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks" (vv. 16–18). That is the life of the renewed man. Joyful, prayerful, thankful.

This is not forced or fake. It flows from a new heart. The *Catechism* places this section within its third part: *thankfulness*. The saved sinner shows his gratitude

not by groaning but by obedience. But again, we avoid extremes: The perpetually gloomy Christian, always weeping, may lack the joy of quickening. The eternally cheerful one may lack the sorrow of mortification. True conversion involves *both*.

Both Parts

“How many parts doth the true conversion of man consist of?” Answer: “Of *two* parts; of the mortification of the old, and the quickening of the new man” (Q&A 88). Not one, but two. True Christianity is not all grief, nor is it all glee. It is sorrow *and* joy. Romans 6–8 shows this clearly: dying with Christ, rising with Him, struggling against the flesh, walking in the Spirit. Ephesians 4–5 says the same: put off the old man, put on the new. The believer is a *twofold* man – old nature and new nature, flesh and spirit. These are “two irreconcilable warring principles.” Conversion, therefore, has two movements: putting off and putting on, mortification and quickening. It requires two affections: sorrow over sin and joy in Christ.

These produce two habits: hatred for sin and love for righteousness. I Thessalonians 5 illustrates both. First, the believer is not like the world: “Ye are all the children of light... not of the night” (v. 5). Therefore, “Let us not sleep... but let us watch and be sober” (v. 6). There is the vigilance of the converted man. In verse 15, Paul shows both sides: “See that none render evil for evil... but ever follow that which is good.” Mortification and quickening again. What is the source of all this? Not man. Not free will. God alone. “God hath not appointed us to wrath” (v. 9). “Who died for us” (v. 10). “Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it” (v. 24). He gives what He commands.

The *Canons of Dordt* (Heads III/IV) reject the Pelagian lie that God adds no new power in conversion. Rejection 6 says we reject those who say faith “is not a quality or gift infused by God.” The truth? God *does* infuse new life! “I will put my law in their inward parts” (Jer. 31:33). “I will pour water upon him that is thirsty” (Isa. 44:3). “The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts” (Rom. 5:5). That’s grace. That’s conversion. That’s the prayer of the Church: “Turn thou me, and I shall be turned” (Jer. 31:18). Or with Augustine: “Give what thou commandest, and command what thou wilt.”

Our Father in Heaven, stir up our cold, indifferent, often sleepy hearts that we may be active in putting to death our sins. Quicken us, Lord God, that we may live unto Thee and be much more zealous in prayer and mortification and seeking the honour and glory of our King, Jesus Christ. Wash away, Lord, our sins in this area too, through our Mediator's intercession. Amen.