

Do our natural passions/desires cease immediately at conversion?

Early in Ephesians, it mentions that we lived in the passions of our flesh and carried out the desires of the body and the mind, as it was our nature as children of wrath (see Ephesians 2:3). So the question is asked whether such passions, actions and desires simply cease at the point of conversion.

Well let me explain what the verse means by the *children of wrath*. That's a Hebrew way of talking. It means people who deserve God's anger against them for their sins. We lived simply according to our own desires, whether they were our own mental desires or psychological desires or physical desires. What Paul is saying is that we lived according to our own desires, apart from Christ. Our desires might have been quite religious, like Saul of Tarsus. He was very religious before he got converted and became a Christian. He thought he was earning salvation by his good religious attainments. So zealous was he for the law that he persecuted the Christians and tried to eliminate the name of Jesus from the earth. He kept the law as best he knew how, but regardless of Christ, and in fact against God: he would have murdered God's Son. Then he got converted. Did he lose forthwith all those wrong desires, passions and whatnot? The biblical answer is, no of course not.

What Paul will tell us, we shall have to consider tomorrow at the end of Ephesians. Of course Christ does make an immediate difference, but then Christ begins to take us in hand and he will ask us to deal with those passions and to put off the old man with his style of living, and to put on the new man. We have strength to do it, of course, because the living Christ comes to live within us. We should not be constantly defeated by sin, for as we continue with Christ and we know the truth and get to know the truth more, Scripture says that the truth will make us free from the constant practice of sin (see John 8:32). On the other hand, John tells us that if as believers we sin, we have an advocate with the Father, and 'if we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:9).

The Bible never claims that believers in Christ are sinlessly perfect this side of heaven, but of course Christ does make an enormous difference. If you'll allow a crude illustration, the Bible says that in one sense, as far as God is concerned, in our unconverted days we were dead in trespasses and in sins. So suppose you came across an open grave in a churchyard and you could see that the corpse was rather filthy. Do you think you would set about trying to clean it up? That would be a bizarre thing to do. No, but what you could do is plant an acorn in the middle of the corpse. In a year or two, there would come out a green shoot and, if you left it long enough, there'd come out an oak tree. What you've done is not to clean up the corpse, so to speak, but you've planted a new life in the corpse. According to Ephesians that that is what God has done and is doing for a believer. We were dead in trespasses and in sins and God gives us a new life. It is the development of that new life that pushes out the old.

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