

The Church of the Servant King

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Survey of the Bible Series – Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians

(SB_1Thess_Lsn1_Introduction)

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

You may recall that on Paul’s second missionary journey, he was prohibited by the Holy Spirit from traveling further north and east to preach in Asia. Instead, he was led to Troas where he received a vision of a man of Macedonia who pleaded with Paul to come to Macedonia (Acts 16:6-10). Paul journeyed to Philippi where he met and converted Lydia, the seller of purple. Paul then went to Thessalonica.

Thessalonica was a port city and a commercial center on the Aegean Sea and along the Egnatian Way that linked Rome to Byzantium. Thus, Thessalonica was one of the wealthiest trade centers of the Roman Empire. It was the capital and the largest city of the Macedonian province – about 200,000 people.

Paul first visited Thessalonica during his second missionary journey with Silas and Timothy. The second missionary journey (Acts 15:36-18:22) occurred soon after the Jerusalem Council meeting (Acts 15:6-29).

On the second missionary journey, Paul and the missionary party had just been released from prison in Philippi and they made their way southward to Thessalonica. For at least three Sabbath days Paul reasoned in the synagogue with those present, and many believed the gospel (Acts 17:2). Paul probably ministered in Thessalonica for a longer time than just three weeks in view of what he wrote that he had done there (e.g. 1 Thess 2:9; cf. Phil 4:15-16). Those who responded to the message of Christ’s sufferings and resurrection (Acts 17:3, 7) were Jews (Acts 17:4) and God-fearing proselytes to Judaism. There were also some leading women of the city and many idol worshipping pagans (Acts 17:4-5).

Once the unbelieving Jews in Thessalonica realized that Paul was converting some from among their ranks, they reacted very vocally and physically (Acts 17:5-9). They attacked the house of Jason with whom Paul had been lodging. The mob dragged Jason before the magistrates and the magistrates simply charged Jason to keep the peace. The result was that the believers encouraged Paul to move on down the road to Berea in an effort to protect him and his party (Acts 17:10).

Paul and his party began their evangelistic work in Berea in the synagogue, as was their custom. However, when many of the Jews there believed, the Thessalonian unbelieving Jews came to Berea and caused more trouble (Acts 17:10-13). The Berean Christians sent Paul to Athens, but Silas and Timothy remained in Berea (Acts 17:14).

While in Athens, Paul requested that Silas and Timothy join him there. However, soon thereafter, Paul sent Silas to Philippi and Timothy to Thessalonica (1 Thess 3:1-3; Acts 17:15). Later both men returned to Paul when Paul was in Corinth working as a tentmaker (Acts 18:3, 5). They brought a gift from the Christians in the Macedonian towns which they had visited (2 Cor 11:9; cf. Phil 4:15).

Timothy’s report of conditions in the Thessalonian church led Paul to write this first epistle. Some of the Thessalonians apparently believed that Jesus Christ was about to return momentarily and had consequently given up their jobs and had become disorderly (cf. 1 Thess 4:11; 5:14). Some worried about what had happened to their loved ones who had died before the Lord had returned (4:13, 18).

Believers were experiencing persecution from Gentiles and unbelieving Jews (2:17 3:10), but they continued to believe the truth that Paul had taught them and were eager to see Paul again (3:6-8).

Some outside the believing community were still hostile to Paul (2:1-12). Apparently, within the believing community, there was some misuse of spiritual gifts as a tendency on the part of some to return to their former habits involving sexual impurity (4:1-8; 5:19-21). It seems clear that Paul wrote this epistle shortly after he arrived in Corinth (1:7-9; 2:17; 3:1, 6; Acts 18:5, 12) – about A.D. 51.

MAJOR THEMES AND EMPHASIS

Because 1 Thessalonians is one of Paul's earliest letters, it reveals much of what Paul preached during his second missionary journey. Evidently, the return of Jesus was a central component of his message since Paul addresses many questions about the 2nd Coming in this letter (as well as 2 Thessalonians).

Paul had at least three purposes in mind when he wrote 1 Thessalonians. First, he wanted to encourage the new believers in their faith (1:2-10). Second, he wanted to correct some misinformation that his opponents were spreading (2:1-3:13). Third, he wanted to provide additional instruction and address questions that would aid the Thessalonians in their growth as Christians and new members of the Body of Christ.

Of all of the doctrinal issues that Paul addresses in this epistle, the most content is focused upon eschatology. Of course, we will examine these passages as we move through the book, but for purposes of our introduction to the epistle, it is important to note that, while the idea of an Advent of the Messiah as a victorious conqueror was a constant theme in the Hebrew Scriptures, some of the other eschatological points made by Paul (e.g. the order of the resurrection of the members of the Body of Christ in 4:15-18) were completely new. The reason – God had provided Paul with new revelation regarding the new body of believers of a new, previously unrevealed dispensation known as the Body of Christ. The epistle to the Galatians, most likely the first Pauline epistle, also contains written evidence that Paul was God's chosen instrument to convey the "mystery" doctrines relating to new Gentile-centric dispensation.