

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Good news that changed Cities: Thessalonica - Acts 17:1-10

In this series of talks, entitled "Good News that Changed Cities", we have already looked at Jerusalem, Samaria and Philippi. Today, we are going to think about Thessalonica, and the conversion of the first Christians there. To do so, we shall be considering in some detail Acts 17:1-10. We shall refer to the relevant verses as we go along.

Historical background

Thessalonica had already been in existence since ancient times, but was enlarged and updated in about the year 315 BC by the then local king, Cassander, who renamed it after his wife, the sister of Alexander the Great.

The Romans captured and conquered the region of Macedonia in 168 BC and made the city of Thessalonica an even more up to date sea port and naval station. They furnished it with good quality docks which enhanced its commercial status even further. Under the Romans it was a city of real note, and became the capital of Macedonia, boasting a population of over 200,000. In the New Testament Apostles' days, Thessalonica was a key city, on a strategic military highway which afforded Rome easy access to the East. It was a largely self-governing, so called 'free' Roman city, administratively, strategically and commercially important.

Sadly, like most ancient cities, the majority of its population seems to have been poorly paid labourers. History records that their standards of living, and also of conduct, were very low. There would have been no difficulty at all in such an area to draw upon the type of crowd referred to in Acts 17:5 as being used by the Jews to stir up violent trouble for the Christian evangelists.

Thessalonica's Economic, Political and Ecclesiastical Background

Because the city lay on one of the major, strategic routes from Rome to the East, it became a great commercial centre. As a port of such importance as Thessalonica, foreigners were certain to be found in large numbers. In addition to its native Greek population, it attracted prosperous Romans. This naturally also attracted shrewd Jewish merchants interested in the commercial opportunities. The Jewish population was therefore large enough, and wealthy enough, to establish and sustain a fully fledged Jewish synagogue, as we are told in Acts 17:1. This also attracted many devout Gentiles.

Just a thought on the Personal Background and Characteristics of Paul the Apostle

Reading the scriptures that refer to Saul of Tarsus, who became the Apostle Paul after he trusted the Lord Jesus Christ as his Saviour and Lord (see Acts 9:1-9), we cannot escape the conclusion that he was a most intense person (see Acts 7:58-8:3, Acts 9:1-2). He truly believed that he should throw himself whole heartedly, lock, stock and barrel, in for a penny, in for a pound, with total, whole hearted commitment, into whatever activity he believed was right. Before his conversion to Christianity, he was determined, as an ultra orthodox Jew, and as far as he could, to expose Christians as heretics, and to have them at the very least persecuted and put in prison (see Acts 9:1-2, and Acts 26:9-11). As soon as he became a Christian, he threw himself just as wholeheartedly into preaching the Christian gospel. He was willing to suffer any amount of painful persecution to himself if it led to souls being saved for Christ.

What about Paul's companions?

Silas was also a Jew (Acts 16:20), a chief man among the brethren at Jerusalem (Acts 15:27), a prophet (Acts 15:32), and a companion of Paul on his second missionary journey (Acts 15:40). Later, Silas was also a companion of the Apostle Peter (see 1 Peter 5:12).

Timothy was a relatively young man; perhaps, as we would say, of early middle age. He was the son of a Jewish woman who believed the Christian Gospel. His father was a Greek, but Acts 16:1 tells us, at least by implication, that he was not a Christian. It would also appear that Timothy was somewhat delicate in health (read 1 Timothy 5:23), but he was keen to serve the Lord as well as he could.

Together, these three preached the gospel at Thessalonica under the leadership of Paul. This was a balanced, godly association of maturity and youth. The happy blend of mature experience and youthful vigour that works so well in many spheres, and particularly in the service of the Lord, had previously been seen with Moses and Joshua, also Elijah and Elisha, in the Old Testament. It was likewise demonstrated by Peter and John in the Gospels, and by Paul and Titus in The Book of Acts and The New Testament Epistles. And now, the same principle was evident in the relationship of Paul and Timothy.

It is always deeply encouraging to older servants of the Lord, when they are beginning to feel their age and weakness, to see younger brethren who are able and willing to take the strain that the older ones have borne for many years. Those who have borne the heat of the day for many years, again in any sphere, are delighted to have the opportunity to pass on their knowledge, and the wisdom that comes with experience, to the next generation. In line with that, Paul the elder did not hesitate to acknowledge the gift of younger men and to associate them with himself in his work for the Lord. They, in their turn, were careful not to give the impression that they thought that they could act independently of him, but were anxious to develop the qualities recommended in Philippians 2:3. *“Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.”*

Paul's mission

Paul's visit to Thessalonica, and the conversion of the first Christians there, are described in today's portion, Acts 17:1-10

In line with his usual practice, Paul went first of all to the synagogue, so that the Jews might be given the first opportunity to respond to the Christian gospel. As we read in Romans 1:16, *“Salvation is first to the Jews, and also, after that, to the Greeks [or Gentiles generally].”* We learn, in Acts 17:2, *“Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three Sabbath days [and, surely, of course, the days in between] reasoned with them out of the Scriptures.”* This means that he was with them, and expounding the Scriptures to them, for a minimum of 15 days and a maximum of 25 days. This gave him the opportunity for a very concentrated period of study, preaching and teaching primarily that Christ must, of necessity, suffer, be crucified, and be raised again out from among the dead. This means:

1. The Messiah of the Jews must suffer death and rise again out from among the dead;
2. Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah of Israel;
3. The long-promised Messiah of Israel would be refused by most of the Jews, opening the door for Him to be revealed as the potential Saviour of all the people of the world, including of course, the mainly Gentile population of Thessalonica;
4. Jesus had died to save them, and been raised again out from among the dead, so that they could be absolutely sure that they were fully saved, not by any works of righteousness they could do, but by faith in the value to God of the work of Christ on their behalf; and
5. New altogether to all of them, whether Jew or Gentile, was the revelation that their beloved Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was once offered to bear their sins, would come a second time, altogether apart from dealing with their sins, but with a view to their eternal, absolute, total salvation (read Hebrews 9:26-28).

We can get a fuller picture of the character of his work there from the two Epistles he later wrote to them, that is, 1 Thessalonians and 2 Thessalonians. He wrote them during his year and a half stay at Corinth, as recorded in Acts 18. This city, Thessalonica, was soon to become a base from which the gospel would fan out all over Europe, but for the moment only a mere sprinkling of Jews believed.

However, this opened the door for the conversion of many God-fearing Gentiles (see 1 Thessalonians 1:9, and 1 Thessalonians 2:13). In addition, Acts 17:4 tells us that several of the most influential women in the city were also saved. From this relatively brief visit, the thriving New Testament church at Thessalonica was planted and grew. As is said of so many things, from such a tiny acorn, the mighty oak of Christianity has grown.

Inevitably, when God and His servants are at work, Satan invariably does his utmost to oppose the work. The jealousy of the unbelieving Jews, absolutely infuriated by this loss to their beloved Judaism, stirred up a riot. They attacked the house of Jason, with whom the evangelists were apparently staying during their visit. Jason was dragged before the authorities. He was made to put up security for the peace of the city. The details are given in Acts 17:5-9. The Jews made such a turmoil that both out of consideration for the municipal authorities, and for their

own safety and that of the converts, Paul and Silas left the city the same night, and escaped to Berea (Acts 17:10), a town about fifty miles to the south west.

This cut short Paul's service in Thessalonica, for he served in the spirit of the Lord's instruction recorded in Matthew 10:14. "*Whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when you depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet.*" In other words, "You have met your responsibility by preaching the gospel to them. How they react is their responsibility, and they are responsible to Me for that."

The move to Berea gave Paul a further opportunity to preach the gospel. Here the response was very different. Those who lived there are rightly commended in God's Word. They had an open mind, that is characterised in Acts 17:11 as being "*more noble.*" When Paul showed them what the Scriptures foretold, we are told that "*they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, [to satisfy themselves] whether those things were so.*" A mind that is free from prejudice, and ready to bow to Scripture, is indeed noble. Acts 17:12 tells us that in addition to the Jews who were converted, some influential Greek women and many Greek men also believed.

The missionaries would have been content to stay there to develop the work further, but were again disturbed. Sadly, religious but unconverted Jews from Thessalonica, when they heard about this ready response to the preaching of the gospel at Berea, came over and caused more trouble. This proved, once more, that religion, without Christ, can be very dangerous. They had heard that the word of God was being preached by Paul at Berea. They arrived there from Thessalonica determined to stir up more trouble (Acts 17:13).

This forced Paul to flee with an escort of brethren to Athens (Acts 17:15). Silas and Timothy remained at Berea to complete the work there (Acts 17:14), for evidently the animosity was specially directed against Paul, who, as we learn in Acts 14:12, was the chief speaker. Hence it came to pass that in his visit to Athens, the great centre of Greek culture and wisdom, Paul was by himself, as far as his service was concerned. However, Athens will be the subject of next week's talk, so we must leave the matter there for the moment.

As we have considered, the church at Thessalonica was established in the face of open opposition. The enforced brevity of his stay is reflected in passages in the letters he sent them, in which he rekindles the memory of teaching he had passed on when he was with them. Leaving them in this way, exposed to persecution from the start, he was naturally anxious about them. There had been little opportunity to give them as thorough a basic teaching as he would have wished. It is apparent, moreover, that he had heard tidings from Thessalonica of the "*falling asleep*" (that is, the dying) of some of those who had so recently received Christ Jesus as Lord (read 1 Thessalonians 4:13). This had caused consternation amongst the new converts, who had got the impression that they would all still be alive when Jesus comes again. We can understand that Paul would want to deal thoroughly with that apparent problem when he wrote to them in detail in his Epistles to them. As with all Scripture, we now get the gain of things that were written then to deal specifically with very important if local problems at the time they were written.

It was against this background that Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians in AD 54. His primary purpose was to express his gratitude and thanksgiving to God for the wonderful way in which the Thessalonian believers had withstood pagan opposition and even fiercer Jewish persecution, encouraging them at the same time to continue in the steadfastness of their faith. In addition, the teaching concerning the return of the Lord Jesus Christ had been both abused and misunderstood. It was necessary to admonish the disorderly minority who used this vital doctrine of the coming of the Lord as an excuse for avoiding valid earthly responsibilities. Also, some were consumed by intense grief because through death their loved ones had apparently missed out on the blessing associated with the coming again of their Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Paul's exercise was to establish and emphasise the balance between the joy of the Lord's return, and the need to live appropriately godly and responsible lives in view of the Lord's return.

Finally, there were necessary instructions in respect of godliness and holiness. All temptations to return to the easy-going pagan life of loose living must be resisted. Spiritual leaders and gifts must be respected. Fellow brethren must be helped in distress. In general, the believer's life should be marked by unceasing praise, prayer, and practical sanctification - all in preparation for the second coming of Christ.

At Thessalonica, unbelieving Jews had been guilty of terrible opposition and disorder against the preaching of the Christian gospel. What they did not realise was that in stigmatising Paul and Silas as "*those who had turned the world upside down*", as recorded in 1 Thessalonians 1:6, they unknowingly rendered valuable if involuntary tribute to the Christian gospel, preached with the mighty power of the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven. They might oppose, but they certainly could not stop, its advance.

Paul eventually wrote to seven churches, or groups of churches: Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians. His two Thessalonian letters were almost certainly among the very first of the inspired writings which came from his pen. Yet, in our New Testament, we find them last in order of his church epistles. There is a very good reason for this.

In their position in the New Testament, his church epistles are placed, not in chronological sequence, but in moral order. Since both Thessalonian letters deal with aspects of the Lord's return, and plant our feet on the highest possible moral ground, necessarily they come last. There can be nothing, in this life, more significant than the knowledge of the Lord's return. It affects both the church and the world, and is intensely practical.

We would be doing ourselves, and, of course, our Lord and Master, a terrible injustice if we do not pay heed to the challenge the Scriptures bring before us, and, among many others, that in 1 John 3:3: *"every [one] who has this hope in (Christ) purifieth himself, even as [Christ] is pure."*

Thank you very much indeed for listening. May the Lord give us each the grace to put into practice what we know to be true. As we are told in the Lord's own words in John 13:17, *"Ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them."*

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