

1 and 2 Thessalonians

The Gospel Comes to Thessalonica

Lesson #1 for July 7, 2012

Scriptures: Acts 16:9-40; 17:1-4,12; Jeremiah 23:1-6; Isaiah 9:1-7; Isaiah 53; Romans 1:16.

1. This lesson focuses on the historical details immediately connected with Paul and Silas' going to Thessalonica and what happened thereafter. These two short letters to the Thessalonians were written right after Paul left Thessalonica and are almost certainly the very first books of the New Testament to be written. Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13, NIV. Would you dare to call anything that you had written or spoken, "The word of God"? Review the chronology at www.Theox.org - See Teacher's Guides, Acts. Also see Teacher's Guide, Thessalonians.
2. Paul was specifically directed to Macedonia (Greece today) by a vision. His previous vision was on the Damascus road. He had planned to go north or possibly south rather than west, but the Holy Spirit "prevented" him. Thus, he found himself in Philippi, named after Alexander the Great's father. Philippi was a Roman colony. After casting out the demon from a young lady in Philippi, Paul and Silas were arrested, severely beaten, and put in prison. In the middle of the night, an earthquake shattered the jail, and they were taken to the jailer's home where they preached the gospel to him and his family. The jailer and his family became Christians as a result of that experience.
3. The next day, the leaders of the city apologized to Paul and Silas because Paul and Silas were Roman citizens; and then, the leaders asked them please to leave. Because they were Roman citizens, Paul demanded proper treatment. From there, they went to Thessalonica, named after Alexander's sister. Thessalonica was a very important city because it was on the Egnatian Road which was the main road stretching east from Rome and the coast of Greece to Constantinople on the Bosphorus and then on to Asia Minor and further east. Thessalonica was a major trading center. Paul viewed it as a great place from which the gospel could spread out in all directions.
4. Read Acts 17:1-10. Paul was not allowed to stay in Thessalonica beyond about three weeks. How did he make such an impact on not only the Jews but also the Gentiles in that city in such a short time? What was it that Paul said or did that attracted them?
5. Paul escaped to Berea but was forced to leave Berea because the group from Thessalonica went there to hunt him. He then went with some friends to Athens. He asked for Timothy and Silas to join him in Athens as soon as possible.
6. As soon as Timothy arrived in Athens, Paul presented his concerns for the Thessalonians. After all, he had only been with them for a short period of time. He was worried that the gospel had not taken firm root in their minds and hearts. So, he asked Timothy to go back to Thessalonica as quickly as possible and see how they were doing. (1 Thessalonians 3:1-2,5; 2:17) What information did Timothy get from the Thessalonians? There was some very good news: The affection of the Thessalonians for Paul was as strong as ever, and they were still standing fast in their faith. (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16; 3:4-5; 4:9-10) Paul could still call them "his glory and his joy." (1 Thessalonians 2:20) But, there were other things that worried Paul (See *Daily Study Bible* on Thessalonians):
 - (i) The preaching of the Second Coming had produced an unhealthy situation in which people had stopped working and had abandoned all ordinary pursuits to await the Second Coming with a kind of hysterical expectancy. So Paul tells them to be quiet and to get on with their work (1 Thessalonians 4:11).
 - (ii) They were worried about what was to happen to those who died (Were they persecuted?) before the Second Coming arrived. Paul explains that those who fall asleep in Jesus will miss none of the glory (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).
 - (iii) There was a tendency to despise all lawful authority; the argumentative Greek was always in danger of producing a democracy run mad (1 Thess. 5:12-14).

- (iv) There was the ever-present danger that they would relapse into immorality. It was hard to unlearn the point of view of generations and to escape the contagion of the heathen world (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8).
 - (v) There was at least a section who slandered Paul. They hinted that he preached the gospel for what he could get out of it (1 Thessalonians 2:5,9); and that he was something of a dictator (1 Thessalonians 2:6,7,11).
 - (vi) There was a certain amount of division in the Church (1 Thessalonians 4:9; 5:13). (*Daily Study Bible - Introduction to 1 & 2 Thessalonians*)
7. So, Paul had to deal with these problems, and he attempted to do so. Unfortunately, having read Paul's first letter to them, the Thessalonians apparently got the idea that Jesus would be coming back very soon. Some of them decided to stop working. So, Paul needed to write a second shorter letter to assure them that there would be some delay. (2 Thessalonians 2:3-12). Of course, Paul repeated some of his teachings from 1 Thessalonians; but in his second letter, he was warning them about the belief that Jesus would come very soon.
- Thessalonians**
- The way we perceive the future sculpts the present, gives contour and tone to nearly every action and thought through the day. If our sense of future is weak, we live listlessly. Much emotional and mental illness and most suicides occur among men and women who feel that they "have no future."
- The Christian faith has always been characterized by a strong and focused sense of future, with belief in the Second Coming of Jesus as the most distinctive detail. From the day Jesus ascended into heaven, his followers lived in expectancy of his return. He told them he was coming back. They believed he was coming back. They continue to believe it. For Christians, it is the most important thing to know and believe about the future.
- The practical effect of this belief is to charge each moment of the present with hope. For if the future is dominated by the coming again of Jesus, there is little room left on the screen for projecting our anxieties and fantasies. It takes the clutter out of our lives. We're far more free to respond spontaneously to the freedom of God.
- All the same, the belief can be misconceived so that it results in paralyzing fear for some, shiftless indolence in others. Paul's two letters to the Christians in Thessalonica, among much else, correct such debilitating misconceptions, prodding us to continue to live forward in taut and joyful expectancy for what God will do next in Jesus. (*The Message - Introduction to Thessalonians*)
8. Somehow, Paul managed to convince people in a number of cities and under a number of different kinds of circumstances to believe in the gospel. How do we establish that kind of confidence in God's Word? How do we convince people today that a book written more than 2000 years ago is still relevant to them? We must always use good solid evidence:
- God never asks us to believe, without giving sufficient evidence upon which to base our faith. His existence, His character, the truthfulness of His word, are all established by testimony that appeals to our reason; and this testimony is abundant.** Yet God has never removed the possibility of doubt. Our faith must rest upon evidence, not demonstration. Those who wish to doubt will have opportunity; while those who really desire to know the truth will find plenty of evidence on which to rest their faith. *Steps to Christ* 105.2.
9. Apparently, Paul convinced the Thessalonians that the life and death of Jesus was a fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament and that the second coming of Jesus was a certainty. Could you do that with your friends who are scientists and evolutionists? How did he do that? What evidence can we use today to convince people in our generation? Are we sure ourselves?

10. Read Acts 16:9-40. Before going to Thessalonica, Paul was in Philippi. After being followed and harassed by a demon-possessed woman for some period of time, Paul turned and cast the demon out of her. Unfortunately, she had been used by her manipulators as if she could foretell the future. So, when she became healthy again, they lost their source of income. They accused Paul and Silas of introducing new customs contrary to Roman law and saying that there was a new King, Jesus.
11. Our Christian friends focus on the fact that God's mighty actions in Christ should lead us to repentance, forgiveness, acceptance by God, and then final transformation. (Romans 1:16,17) All of this will lead to salvation which in the original Greek means healing.
12. But, the best and most important good news of all is that God is not the kind of Person His enemies have made Him out to be. If He were arbitrary, exacting, vengeful, unforgiving, and severe, as Satan has claimed, none of us would want to live with Him. But, even while we were still sinners, (Romans 5) God's work of redemption was accomplished through the life and death of Jesus Christ. We do not need to do anything to improve on what God did—we couldn't anyway. We just need to accept the fact that we are sinners and only God can do anything about it. But, what does God need to do to deal with our sins?
13. Read Acts 17:1-3. If there was a synagogue in a city that Paul visited, he went there first to teach. He knew that he would not be able to convince Jews to believe in the gospel if he had approached Gentiles first. You have to meet people where they are.
14. In Paul's day if a scholar arrived in a city or town where there was a synagogue and especially if he had experience back in Jerusalem, he was often asked to read from the Scriptures and to comment. That fit perfectly with Paul's approach. He would begin by pointing out portions from what we know as the Old Testament regarding the coming Messiah. No doubt, he used a number of passages from the Old Testament beginning with Genesis 3:15 and probably ending with Isaiah 53. The Jews who were well-informed must have understood that there were two trains of thought in the Old Testament. One train focused on the idea that the coming Messiah would establish a kingdom and rule forever. The other train of thought focused on the idea that the Messiah would be a suffering Servant. The Jews were not quite sure how to put those two ideas together; and, of course, they preferred the former. Then, Paul would focus on showing how the life of Jesus Christ was a fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament.
15. Even in our day, many Jews read the passages in the Old Testament suggesting that the One coming would be a suffering Servant and interpret those passages as referring to the Jewish nation as a whole. Is it possible that just as the ancient Jews were confused about the details of Christ's first coming, we could be confused about the details of the second coming?
16. Indeed, there are many examples from the Old Testament of people whose lives went through a period of terrible suffering or solitude before they finally overcame to live a life of victory. Think of the stories of Joseph, Moses, even David in exile, and Daniel.
17. So, what was the attitude of the church members in Thessalonica when they heard Paul's message? Some of the Jews were ready to join Paul and believe what he said. There were also leading Greek women and a large number of Greeks who had been worshiping God and decided that Christianity was the correct way to go. It is interesting to notice that two of the people who became Christians under this instruction from Paul were Aristarchus who became a fellow prisoners of his at a later time and Jason who apparently had a large house where the church met. (Colossians 4:10,11; Acts 17:4-9) In any case, it seems clear that the church that was finally established in Thessalonica was largely Gentile. Once again, we are reminded that the gospel is supposed to reach out to everyone: Rich and poor, Jews and Greeks, even "barbarians."
18. What about us today? Is our message to be presented before the whole world?

From Paul's day to the present time, God by His Holy Spirit has been calling after the Jew as well as the Gentile. "There is no respect of persons with God," declared Paul. The apostle regarded himself as "debtor both to the Greeks, and to the barbarians," [Romans 1:14] as well as to the Jews; but he never lost sight of the

decided advantages possessed by the Jews over others, "chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God." [Romans 3:3] "The gospel," he declared, "is the power of God unto salvation [healing] to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." [Romans 1:16]—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 380. Information in brackets is added.

19. Have you ever wondered what texts from the Old Testament Paul and others might have used to support the idea of a suffering Messiah? Consider the following: Genesis 3:15; 22:18; 49:10; Deuteronomy 18:15,18; Psalms 16:9,10; 22:6-8; 17,18; 69:8,9,20; Isaiah 11:1-3; 42:1-4; 50:6; 53:1-12; 55:3-5; 61:1-3; Jeremiah 23:5,6; 33:17,18; and Micah 5:1,2.

In the closing proclamation of the gospel, when special work is to be done for classes of people hitherto neglected, God expects His messengers to take particular interest in the Jewish people whom they find in all parts of the earth. . . . As they see the Christ of the gospel dispensation portrayed in the pages of the Old Testament Scriptures, and perceive how clearly the New Testament explains the Old, their slumbering faculties will be aroused, and they will recognize Christ as the Saviour of the world. Many will by faith receive Christ as their Redeemer.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 381.

20. Do you think the Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament could be used in approaching Jews in our day? What about approaching even secular Jews? What kind of approaches should or could we use for secular people of almost any kind? How do we convince people of the truth of Scripture? Do we need to find some way to start from a non-biblical perspective? Consider what Paul did when speaking to the philosophers and scholars in Athens.
21. What questions do you suppose Paul raised—and then tried to answer—for the benefit of the Thessalonians? Did he discuss why Jesus had to die? (Romans 3:25,26) How does the death of Jesus impact your sins? Why couldn't God simply have forgiven Adam and Eve and left them in the garden? Does the death of Jesus somehow restore the relationship between sinners and God?
22. Why do you think Luke wrote in Acts 17:1-4 that the death of Christ was necessary? To the Jews, the Messiah was supposed to conquer the Romans—not to be put to death by them! Does God have to prove that He Himself is righteous before He can set us right? Why would that be necessary?
23. The widely accepted **forensic theory** of **atonement** suggests that "justice" demands the death of the sinner. According to that view, in order to save sinners, God the Father agreed to accept the death of His Son in payment for the price of sin. Then, He could pronounce that justice is satisfied, thus removing the legal barrier so that He can accept sinners back again. Wouldn't a human judge be worthy of condemnation if He condemned the Innocent in order to free the guilty? As asked by the literary character Bozo/Boso in Anselm's (c. 1033-1109) *Cur Deus Homo*, **if God could only save sinners by condemning the Innocent, is He truly omnipotent? If, on the other hand, He could, but is not willing to do so, how are we to think of Him as wise and just? What justice could there possibly be in accepting the death of the most innocent Man who ever lived in place of the guilty? No human legal system would accept that. So, how can God do such a thing?** And if this "legal" transaction makes it possible for God to save sinners because they are "covered with the righteousness of Christ," would that suggest that we are taken into heaven without God the Father realizing that we are still sinners? Is this legal fiction?

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