

1 and 2 Thessalonians

Thessalonica in Paul's Day

Lesson #3 for July 21, 2012

Scriptures: John 11:48-50; 1 John 2:15-17; 1 Corinthians 9:19-27; John 3:3-8; 1 Corinthians 16:19.

1. This lesson will be unique in the history of Sabbath school lessons in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It focuses not on the words of Scripture but on the background context in which Paul preached to the Thessalonians. As such, we will attempt to understand what was occurring in Thessalonica at the time and how it might have influenced the spread of the gospel in that place.
2. Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-27. (Compare 1 Corinthians 10:25-33; Galatians 1:8,9) Paul was prepared to do whatever necessary—without compromising the gospel—in order to win Jew or Gentile. When he was with Jews, he acted like a Jew; when he was with Gentiles, he acted like a Gentile. So, how were Jews and Gentiles in Thessalonica acting in the mid-1st century A.D.? And what is the role of archaeology in our study of the Bible? Our understanding of almost everything depends on the context. The biblical context includes two very different things. It includes the historical context—what was happening that led to the writing of these letters—and the linguistic context—what was the meaning of the words to the original audience. Ideally, we would like to be able to put ourselves in the shoes of Paul's first audience in Thessalonica and understand those words as they understood them. In order to do that, we must also understand the ideas and beliefs of the Thessalonians. Presumably, the better we understand them, the better we will understand why Paul wrote what he did. What were the wrong ideas that Paul needed to correct? Often, getting people to give up their wrong ideas and beliefs is even more difficult than getting them to accept correct ideas and beliefs.
3. Read John 11:48-50. How was Rome perceived in the 1st century A.D.? Did the Sanhedrin really believe that if Jesus rose to power, the Romans would destroy their nation? Or, were they just afraid that they would lose their power over the people? Where was Paul when Caiaphas first made that statement? Did Paul have any contact with Caiaphas? Paul seemed to suggest that he never actually saw Christ during His earthly ministry. However, he did come face-to-face with Him on the Damascus road. (1 Corinthians 15:8; Acts 9:1-19; 22:6-16; 26:12-18)
4. In the 1st century in the area that today we call Greece, there were several city states which were often in conflict with each other. At one point, the Thessalonians were fearful of being overrun by a rival city state. Since Rome was a rising world power at the time, the Thessalonians invited the Romans to come in and help to protect them from their enemies. In 168 B.C., the Romans arrived, and they rewarded Thessalonica by allowing the city to have its own form of self-government. It was a so-called "free city" within the Roman Empire. Thessalonica had five mayors that had to agree on how to rule the city. Because Rome had helped them in their rivalry with their enemies, Thessalonica became pro-Rome and pro-emperor. But, there were several disadvantages to that. As always, going through a war situation and having a new power arrive on the scene led to economic dislocation and disruption. The poorer classes were always hurt more by this kind of disruption than were the wealthier ones. While it is true that Thessalonica remained a free city, its allegiance to Rome meant that there was a kind of foreign occupation. Foreign occupations are never popular for very long. More than that, a certain percentage of crops, minerals, and other local products had to be sent to Rome as tax. And those taxes and other disruptions were particularly hard on the lower economic classes.
5. To what extent does the current economic situation impact our churches today? When there is economic distress, do more people turn to religion? If so, why? When hard times come, should Christians let the government act? Or, should we as churches or as individuals do something?
6. Thessalonica had its own religion. This religion was known as the Cabirus cult. Cabirus was a young man who spoke up for the disenfranchised poor and the powerless. For some reason, he was eventually murdered by his two brothers. Notice these comments from scholars.
7. Cabirus was the patron god of Thessalonica (originally of manual laborers, but by

the 1st cent. co-opted into the civic cult). Cabirus was a hero who had been murdered by his two brothers; his head had been crowned and wrapped in a royal purple cloth (so the legend goes), and carried on a spear point to be consecrated and buried at the foot of Mt. Olympus by his guilt-ridden (and justice avoiding) brothers. In his honor they established a cult for him (sources divide over whether the brothers took the phallus of Bacchus with them from Mt. Olympus). Intermittently, Cabirus returns with his full powers restored, and is able to: help in the manufacture of iron and the performance of manual labor (coins picture him with forge and hammer); perform magical feats for the needy; provide freedom for slaves; empower sexual fulfillment.

Cabirus worship is especially interesting. It involved an initiation in special robes, confessing sins, cleansing through water baptism and symbolic immersion in the blood of the martyred god. Cabiric art (murals in Samothrace) portray dance that was "lighthearted, Bacchic, noisy...(and) grotesquely phallic" (R.W. Witt, in Jewett, p. 130). http://www.rts.edu/Site/Staff/rkidd/CourseMaterials/Documents/ActsPaul/07_The_Thessalonian_Correspondence.pdf

8. Notice that it was believed that Cabirus would return to life from time to time to help the lower classes and bring justice to the city. They also believed that he would restore the city to its earlier greatness. That gave a flame of hope to the lower classes. These kinds of beliefs might seem incredible to us; but, remember that Herod believed that Jesus was John the Baptist come back to life. (Mark 6:14,16; Luke 9:7)
9. Do you think it was just an accident that the worship of Cabirus included "blood sacrifices" and being "baptized in the blood" to commemorate his martyrdom? There were a number of similar cults around the Mediterranean world in those days. They had various forms of dying and rising saviors who often spoke up for the lower classes. Sometimes, they were believed to have human mothers and divine fathers and to have died martyrs' deaths, and they were expected to rise to glory at some time in the future.
10. Who do you suppose was behind those ideas that mimic—and many preceded—the life and ministry of Jesus? Was Satan trying to make the story of Jesus seem like just another pagan cult? When we see how Satan to the best of his ability tried to imitate the first coming of Christ, what do you think he will do as we approach the second coming of Christ?
11. There is one other thing we need to note about the Cabirus cult. In the days of Caesar Augustus, people began to worship him as a god. In the area around Thessalonica, the Romans proclaimed that, in fact, Caesar Augustus was Cabirus come back to life. Thus, the occupying authority tried to claim the hopes and spiritual beliefs of the people to support their cause. The common people were left without a meaningful religion. But, it also meant that if someone arrived claiming to be like Cabirus, he would be perceived as an immediate threat.
12. Probably the most stunning example of Augustus's claims is found in the *Priene inscription* dating to approximately 9 B.C.

It seemed good to the Greeks of Asia, in the opinion of the high priest Apollonius of Menophilus Azanitus: Since providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance excelled even our anticipations, surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings for the world that came by reason of him, which Asia resolved in Smyrna. <http://www.textexcavation.com/augustus.html>
13. By contrast, Paul was speaking to his hearers not of fictitious so-called human gods but of a real Messiah-Christ who really died, really rose to life, and directly proved to His followers that He had done so. Jesus is no huckster.

14. Read 1 John 2:15-17. Have you ever wondered what these verses are talking about? Have you found that any of the things of this world bring real long-term happiness? Why is it that earthly things do not seem to bring long-term satisfaction? Does your Christianity help with this problem? What is it about Christianity that brings real happiness? Does this have something to do with selfishness which is this world's approach versus love which is God's approach?
15. We do not know to what degree Paul understood the Cabirus cult and its implications. But, it is not hard to see how a Messiah who truly rose from the dead might excite the hopes especially of the poor classes of people in Thessalonica. Thus, we see that in a very short period of time, the Thessalonian church was established. Do you suppose that this church ate together, worked together, and shared their wealth as did the early Jerusalem church after Pentecost? Might this have been the reason why "loafers" and the "lazy" were attracted? Should we tell people who stand by the road and beg for a handout to get to work in the same way as Paul said that to the Thessalonians? How do we avoid the "rice Christian" phenomenon?
16. Clearly, one of the secrets of success in evangelism is understanding the people to whom you are talking. We must learn to meet people where they are. At the same time, we must never leave our Christianity behind! And there will always be a conflict between those two positions. Multiple experiences have shown that people are most often open to changes in their thinking and behavior in times of disruption or change. What kind of changes are we talking about? Economic turmoil, political strife, war, weddings, divorce, dislocations, a move from one place to another, health challenges, and even death. These changes cause people to ask themselves serious questions. People find themselves in a different set of circumstances, and they have to establish new relationships. Could we as Seventh-day Adventists use this information to help spread the gospel? Should we be reading the obituary columns in the newspaper and contacting the families of the bereaved? Should we join the "welcome wagon" organizations which are intended to inform new citizens about the facilities/cultural attractions of their city?
17. But, we also must recognize that being baptized is a dislocation, a disruption, in peoples' ways of thinking. Thus, it leaves them in a somewhat unstable position at first. Most exiting through the back door occurs within the first few months after conversion.
18. In the Mediterranean world of Paul's day, there was a proliferation of popular philosophers. The Greeks particularly loved to hear people talk, discuss, and debate. There were public forums. These so-called "street preachers" were expected to earn the right to speak by demonstrating the results of their recommendations in their own lives. "Physician, heal thyself" was a well-known concept in their world. So, it should be obvious that there were many parallels between those popular "preachers" and Paul. But, Paul's approach was somewhat different. Although he began his work often in public places and usually starting in the synagogues, he sought to form a lasting community. He asked the people not only to become better members of their communities but also to separate themselves from the world. More than that, Paul suggested that conversion to Christianity was not just being convinced by a wise speech but was instead a supernatural work of God, the power of which came from outside. (Galatians 4:19; John 3:3-8; Philippians 1:6)
19. Unfortunately, many of the street preachers were hucksters. Not only would they take advantage of their listeners financially but also sometimes sexually as well. Thus, a great deal of cynicism existed about street preachers. Paul did his very best to avoid any of that type of criticism by generally refusing support from his listeners. He worked hard—sometimes working all night so he could preach most of the day. His suffering and his absolute commitment to what he preached and the fact that he did not ask for any personal gain set Paul apart from others.
20. Read Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; and Philemon 1,2. What do these verses have in common that teaches us about the nature of Christian churches in Paul's day? Christian churches almost always met in peoples' homes. There were two types of homes commonly built in those days. The *domus* was a large single-family home which could include rooms for other members of the family and servants, even slaves. Those homes were large enough so that, in some instances, they could accommodate audiences in the courtyard of 30 to 100 people. Such homes, of course, belonged to the relatively well-to-do. On the other hand, the *insula* were small homes often located above shops or restaurants where families of the lower

classes would live.

21. Ideally, a home located near the center of the city would be perfect for a newly-formed Christian church. Something located in the center of the city would be near where people would be passing by and even working.
22. Have you ever worshiped in a home church? In some parts of the world, those are still either the necessary or the preferred place to worship.
23. Read Acts 18:1-3. These verses make it clear that Paul worked as a tent maker to help support himself. And he moved in with Aquila and Priscilla, a couple who were also tent makers, so they could work together.
24. Pharisees tended to be quite wealthy. One almost had to be wealthy to be able to do all the things he needed to do to practice Phariseism. For example, they fasted two days a week. As a Roman citizen and a Pharisee and later a member the Sanhedrin, Paul was almost certainly originally fairly well-to-do. Did he regard working with his hands as a disgrace or something below him? Every Jew was expected to learn a manual trade by which he could support himself during hard times.
25. How well does your local church interact with the community? Are you part of that community in the sense of being involved? Or, is your church locked in a “siege mentality” in which you isolate yourself from the dangers of the world so much that you do not influence it at all? Should Adventists be foremost in getting involved in community help projects? Or, are such things just a part of the “social gospel” and do not have any real impact on people’s lives?
26. As we know, the biblical record covers only events in the Middle East. Was God at work in the Far East? In the Americas? In Africa? Can a person be saved if s/he has never even heard of the name of Jesus? What would be the basis of such salvation? (Romans 1:20)
27. Are church buildings which have been established for worship always the best place to carry out our worship activities?
28. Let us not fool ourselves! Presenting the gospel in a way that is attractive to a given community and meets their needs is a challenge. Do we understand them? Do we understand what their real needs are? The gospel will be most effective when it is perceived as meeting the real needs of the people.
29. One example of Paul’s meeting people where they were is the story about not eating meat offered to idols. (Acts 15; Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8,10) Paul made it very clear that if we exercise our rights, we may at times be ruining a fellow believer. Paul was willing to even give up some of his rights—so long as it did not involve compromising the gospel (Galatians 1:8,9)—in order to be sensitive to other people’s beliefs and customs. He did that so he might find an opportunity to share Christ. Paul had to be willing to spend time with people to get to know them. Do we believe it is safe to spend time with unbelievers without being unduly influenced by them?
30. In the Old Testament, we have examples of outstanding individuals who stood up under very difficult circumstances. Joseph, Moses, and Daniel come to mind. But, there are many, many more examples where the whole nation slipped into the idolatry that was around them instead of being a light to the those nations.
31. So, how are we doing in our day? Are we slipping closer and closer into the customs of the world? Or, are we indeed winning the world for Christ?

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