

# The Church in Thessalonica

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[ 0 : 00 ] I'm going to look at the church in Thessalonica tonight. And the reason I'm looking at this is about a year ago, just July last year, I had three Greek colleagues at work.

So one of them was getting married, and her home city is Thessaloniki, as it's called. So if you put the shot up, you can see this is the city of Thessaloniki, the modern city.

Now, the day before the wedding, the bride and groom had organized for us a walking tour of the city. So we started off in the paths there, and we walked around the city.

And the guide was showing us, showed us the Roman Forum, showed us quite a few historical old arches, old buildings in the city. But near the end, I realized, well, she hadn't really mentioned about Paul.

And where Paul came to the city. So I asked her, what about the Apostle Paul? Where did he actually preach? And she pointed out, if you look up right to the top of the hill, you'll see that the city climbs from the sea upwards.

[ 1 : 14 ] And she said, oh, Paul would have been right up at the top. And it made me realize that he was actually on the periphery of the city, and he would have been, you know, really away from the center of the city.

So when I came back, I started sort of thinking about, it became quite interesting to Thessaloniki, so I started doing a bit of background reading on the church. Now, the city that Paul came to, Thessalonica, would have had a population of about 200,000 in those days.

It was founded around 315 BC by Cassander, who was one of the military commanders of Alexander the Great's army.

And he named the city after his sister, no, after his wife, Thessalonica, and she was actually Alexander's half-sister. So this is the city that Paul came to.

Now, the population of Thessaloniki now, well, the main city is about 300,000, but the urban area is about 1 million people. So the site that Paul was supposed to have spoken at, it's not a monastery.

[ 2 : 32 ] It's right up on the hill up the back of the city, and that's why I started looking into this. And seeing how the church there had come about.

So what I want to do tonight, I want to, first of all, look at the reading that Neil read for us in Acts 17, verses 1 to 9.

This is when Paul went to Thessalonica to preach and really evangelize the people there. And then I want to move to the book of 1 Thessalonians and look at, well, look at chapter 1, but I'll look at some of the other aspects as well.

Now, to put it all into context, in the book of Acts, the latter half of Acts is all about mostly focusing on the three journeys that Paul made with his companions, and then the final journey to Rome.

So the first, what we call the first, second and third missionary journey. So the first missionary journey, Paul went with Silas, and they went to Cyprus, and they went to Asia Minor, which is modern day Turkey.

[ 3 : 43 ] And then they went back, obviously, to Jerusalem. They were at a Jerusalem council. And then Paul and Barnabas decided to set off on another journey, which has become known as the second missionary journey.

But they actually fell out because on the previous journey, John Mark had been with them, and he went back to, he left them. So Paul didn't want to take Mark with them, but Barnabas did.

So they disagreed, and then in the end, Paul took Silas, and then along the way, they met Timothy. And it was Paul, Silas, and Timothy who ended up going to Thessaloniki.

Now, before I look at it, I want to sort of point out really three very important things that allowed the ministry, the whole ministry in Acts, was really providentially dictated by three important factors.

The first one was the Roman Empire. Now, I teach engineering, and one of my third year courses is on transport engineering.

[ 4 : 53 ] And I actually start my first lecture with a look at history of transport and history of roads primarily. And I show the students this slide. And you can see here the Roman road network from maybe starting around 300 BC up to about 500 ADs in their calendar.

The Romans, as you know, built one of the most comprehensive road networks that was built for about 2,000 years. Nobody even came close to...

When I talk into my lecture, I talk about this, the Roman road era, and for about 1,500 years, nothing really happened of significance until probably the days of John Macadam in the 19th century, and then eventually the 20th century with the German autobans and the American interstate.

So, but the Roman road network really allowed the people to start traveling. And of course, the road network was built mainly for military purposes.

Then the second thing that allowed the gospel to spread out was the Greek era. And if you go to the waterfront in Thessaloniki, you'll see the statue of Alexander the Great.

[ 6 : 11 ] Now, Alexander the Great came along 300 years before Christ. And as you know, he was one of the... In this generation, he died when he was 32.

And what he packed into his 32 years is amazing because he conquered Asia, he conquered right across to India, and of course, cities like Alexandria were named after him.

But what Alexander did was he spread the Greek language, Greek philosophy, Greek education, Greek literature, right across the known world as it was then.

So, by the time Paul came to Thessaloniki, Greek was the common language. The Bible had been... The Old Testament had been translated into Greek at that time as well.

So, Greek... The Greek language was really the mechanism by which the gospel spread. And then the third thing that I... That was really important was that the Jews' dispersion.

[ 7 : 17 ] So, the Jews had started leaving Palestine and spreading out over the known world at that time.

They had reached many, many cities in Greece and Turkey, right across that area.

And the slide that I've shown there is the via, the famous via Ignatia, which connected the city of Byzantium with that route across to Italy and then onwards to Rome.

So, Thessaloniki is actually located on the via Ignatia, and it was actually a very important city because the country of Greece, as we know it, was divided into two provinces, two Roman provinces, Macedonia in the north and Achai in the south.

And, of course, Alexander the Great was from Macedonia and he had spread right across the Greek language, across the region. So, Jewish people had come, they had dispersed, they had migrated to cities like Thessaloniki.

[ 8 : 31 ] They brought with them, they came for reasons of commerce, they came for reasons, maybe there had been war or persecution had forced them out of Palestine and, of course, Paul himself wasn't very much instrumental in that persecution as well.

So, these are the three things that really allowed the gospel to spread. There was the Roman Empire, the Greek language, really, and then the Jewish dispersion as well.

Now, the reading that Neil read in Acts 17, if we backtrack to the previous chapter, we saw, we can see that Paul had been in Philippi before he went to Thessaloniki and Philippi, of course, he went, there was no Jewish synagogue in Philippi, so he went to, near the river where there was people made for prayer and led to the conversion of Lydia and then eventually Paul was put in prison and then the Philippian jailer was converted as well.

So, following the ministry in Philippi, Paul then moved on to Thessalonica and if you look at the next map that I put out, that's the Agnesia, you can see that Paul received the famous call to come to Macedonia when he was in Troas and then he goes across the sea to Philippi and then eventually comes to Thessalonica.

Thessalonica is about 100 miles south, west of Philippi. So, it would have taken about two or three days to make the journey. You see from verse 1 of chapter 17, it says, when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica.

[ 10 : 23 ] So, Paul then, of course, the first thing he does as he did in a lot of places he went to, he would look for the Jewish synagogue and we see that in verse 1 as well.



his coming again.

So obviously the Jews reacted badly to the message. Some people believed, we saw that some Jews believed that a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women. Now, the prominent women, I understand, were that a lot of women in Thessalonica and some of the Roman provinces would actually have had a very significant role in society at that time. So that's why he mentions them in the reading. But then, of course, the Jews turned against Paul. They didn't object to his message.

[17:06] They didn't want to accept this message about Christ. So what did they do? They go to the marketplace. They get together a mob and they brought, they went to look for Paul, but obviously Paul had been staying in this Jason's house.

But they found Jason and they brought them before the authorities. And what they were trying to do is they were trying to manipulate the people to show that Paul was preaching an alternative to Caesar because obviously they were calling Jesus a king, when you could only refer to Caesar as a king.

And if you went against Caesar, then it was treason and you could be killed for seeing that. So that's what happened.

And so eventually Paul had to leave Thessalonica. And we read in verse 10, if we continue on to the next section, as soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to bury the...

So, if we had, if we had only had that section in Acts to read, then we would probably think that Paul's ministry in Thessalonica had been a bit of a disaster.

[18:32] But what I want to do now is I want to jump forward to 1 Thessalonians chapter 1. And I'll read that, I'll read the chapter and then I'll just mention a few things about that.

So, chapter 1, 1 Thessalonians, Paul, Silas and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians and God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers.

We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction.

You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord. In spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

[19:41] And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia. Your faith in God has become known everywhere.

Therefore, we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell that you turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for a son from heaven whom you raised from the dead, Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

So, we reckon that, well, we think 1 Thessalonians could have been the first book written, first New Testament book that was written, although some historians think that maybe Galatians was written just slightly before Thessalonians.

But it was one of the first books that was written that were written in the Bible. But I want to, sometimes we look at things and we don't see the very first verse, it says, he says to the church of the Thessalonians.

Now, if we go back to Acts and we see, we look at what happened in Acts, we probably think there's no way a church would have sprung up in Thessalonica. We don't know, Paul had to leave so that the believers there were left to their own resources.

[21:00] So, obviously, they had got together, they had built up a community there and they started meeting as a church. We don't know if it, maybe they were meeting in Jason's house, we have no idea really.

But, Gresham Magin says about this, he said, in the history of early Christianity, the real surprising thing is not that so much of the Gentile churches were founded as that after they were founded, they endured.

They were surrounded by heathenism and immorality, they were subject to persecution. So, it looks surprising to us, but it shouldn't really be surprising to us because we know that God was in this and

Paul was miraculously called in a vision to come to preach in Macedonia, the first gospel preaching that was in Europe, as we know Europe today.

So, after Paul left Macedonia, he went, Thessalonica, he went on to Berea and then he moved down, I think I've got another map showing the route that he took.

You can see there he went to Berea, then he went on to Athens, so we read about both of these churches in Acts 17 and then finally he finished off in Corinth.

[ 22 : 25 ] Now, he sent Timothy, he was really concerned about the church back in Thessalonica, he wasn't sure, he didn't have any reports about what happened to them, so he was really concerned about them, so when they were in Athens, he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to find out exactly what had happened to the church.

And by the time Timothy came back, we think Paul had moved on to Corinth at this point, and he wrote this first letter to Thessalonians from Corinth.

Now, you can see that his relief, you know, he was in this, and he starts off the letter by talking about, we give thanks, we always thank God for all of the universe to mention you in our prayers.

So he didn't really know what to expect, but I guess he was hopeful, but at this point unsure of what had happened to them. But they had developed as a church, they had got together as a church, and they were actually progressing really quite well under the persecution that they were facing in the city.

So I just want to mention a few things. in verse 3, verses 4 and 5, first of all, he talks about, for we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you because our gospel came to you, not simply with word, but also with power.

[ 23 : 57 ] So, first thing is, you know, these people had believed, you know, Paul had come to them, he had preached to them, and that they had believed. So how did this all happen?

Well, we see from the text that it's obviously saying that salvation began with God because he has chosen you.

So we can see that God had chosen them, they had, obviously, God had pre-planned from all eternity that these believers would come to believe in Jesus.

and also their conversion, there was the miraculous conversion because remember, these people were living in a society with multiple gods, multiple idols, and they came to believe in one God and they came to believe in Jesus.

They had faith, they trusted in Jesus, they repented, they turned from their idols and followed the true God.

[ 25 : 05 ] Also, you can see as well that there's a bit of a Trinitarian thing here because you can see that Jesus is mentioned, God the Father is mentioned, and the Holy Spirit is mentioned because there's a Spirit who came in power and if we go back to the very beginning of Acts, we read about the promise of the Holy Spirit, when the Holy Spirit comes, you will receive power.

And then, the second thing I want to touch on is the gospel message. I touched on this a little bit before about wondering about how exactly did Paul communicate the gospel to them.

Well, he would have, there was no New Testament so he would have gone back to the Old Testament. He would have been preaching Greek, obviously. He would have started with God, the Creator.

He'd have talked, probably talked about the fall of sin. He'd have talked about the prophecies, the Old Testament prophets and he'd have finished off by probably talking about Christ, why he came, why he died and the fact that he was going to come back.

And then we see in the text as well in verse 3, this is something that Paul has used previously and especially 1 Corinthians 13 where he talks about the trio faith, love and hope.

[ 26 : 38 ] So there, he commends them on your faith, your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love and your endurance inspired by hope.

That word endurance in the ESV is, the ESV uses steadfastness which is, I think, a really good word because it shows that they were unwavering despite the persecution they were facing.

They were completely unwavering. They were loyal to God and to Jesus and their belief in the church. So, the gospel, well, there's been a real focus, not a great focus on the gospel in recent years.

There's been a lot of books written about the gospel and a lot of this has come primarily from some North American sources like, for example, the Nine Marks movement which came out of Capitol

Hill, Baptists in Washington, I think.

And I've read quite a few books but I'll quote a pastor called J.D. Greer. This is what he said in sort of a summary of, he's got a book called The Gospel and he says, The Gospel is the announcement that God has reconciled us to himself by sending his son Jesus to die as a substitute for our sin and that all who repent and believe have eternal life in him.

[ 28 : 03 ] So, there's another book by Greg Gilbert, What is the Gospel? And again, he says there's a really good comprehensive overview of the gospel as well. Most of these are actually available.

If you have a Kindle, they only cost a few pounds and they're really worth a read. One of my favorite authors that I've been reading quite a lot recently just discovered him last year.

Not very many people have probably heard of him. His name is William P. Farley. He's a pastor in Spokane, Washington in the U.S. And he's written, one book he's written is called Hidden in the Gospel, Truths You Forget to Tell Yourself Every Day.

It's a really practical book just explaining that he said in his introduction and he said that he was Christian for 25 years before he actually discovered that somebody told him about preaching to yourself.

So he's written this book in a way, little sort of snippets of chapters preaching to himself and things that he likes to remind himself of every day. And he covers all the essential aspects of the gospel as well.

[ 29 : 12 ] So, let me move on to just, I'll mention, I've mentioned the persecution and affliction that the believers in Thessalonica were facing.

And we know that, you know, persecution does strengthen the church. We think of the famous quote from Tertullian who said that persecution often leads to a stronger church because the blood of the martyrs becomes the seed of the church.

And also Martin Luther once said as well, Christ was crowned with thorns where you're expecting roses. So, you know, we've seen that across the world in recent times in different countries.

I'm still ongoing in many countries today where persecution does happen. So, generally, the whole letter to the Thessalonians, he was pretty positive in a lot of things but he also picks them up on, they weren't perfect, he picks them up on a few things.

For example, later on, he talks in chapter 1 in verse 6 about you became imitators of us and of the Lord.

[ 30 : 26 ] But later on in chapter 4, he starts to really challenge them about some of their sanctification, their holiness, especially on sexual matters that they were, there was a few issues that he brought out.

And also, he then goes on to write, obviously, the second letter to the Thessalonians and in that letter, he, obviously, some people had stopped working and they were depending on, they were really living off other people and not pulling their weight and he challenges them as well on that. But one of the things that he really focuses on between the two letters is the future. There was a lot of confusion about the return of Christ and the future and some, it was obvious that some of the Thessalonians had died.

We're not sure if they had died in the persecution or they had died naturally, but they were very unsure about the destiny of these individuals who had already died and some people were also confusing and maybe Christ had already come back and Paul tries to point that out to them as well. So, as I bring it to our conclusion, really just, we can learn quite a lot from this book, Thessalonians, 1st and 2nd Thessalonians, Paul's ministry as well, applying it to our own situation.

[ 32 : 00 ] We need to understand, we saw that God used a lot of providential aspects in society to spread the gospel throughout Asia and Europe, primarily through the Roman Empire and the Greek language and also, we have, we live in a world today, we have to look at the signs of the times, there's a lot of things going on, we live in a city, a prominent city, Edinburgh, which Thessalonica would have been one of the leading world cities in its day, we live in a fairly prominent city here, capital city, we have four universities, we have very international orientated city now, but we also live in a city where maybe only, what, 5% of people were in church today, so there's a lot of challenge for us as a church as well, how we reach out, there's also challenges throughout the world, I mentioned my own trips to

Myanmar, I spend, I've spent a lot of time in China, I go to China, I was teaching in China for about seven years on and off, just from here of course, and I go to churches in China which are packed

out, I go to churches in Hong Kong which are packed out, but I go to, three weeks time I'll be going off to the Middle East to a place which has got virtually the Muslim population, virtually no Christians at all, the only churches in the Middle East and where I go is usually expats in the English speaking churches, so there's a real challenge for countries like Myanmar for example which is primarily Buddhist, there's very few Christians and the little church in Rangin is just a very small number meeting together every Sunday as well.

But the letter to Thessalonians can give us a lot of encouragement because I think what it shows very much is that they were together as a community, they were really working as a community and I think, I'll just finish off by a few weeks ago, James and one of the Wednesday night church evenings he mentioned a bit about how we developed points of contact.

Now in Paul's day, his point of contact is usually going through the synagogue and that's where he would be his starting point. For us, it's a big challenge because we no longer have people coming through our doors every Sunday.

Times have changed so we now as a church have to look at how we can develop points of contact. It's something that James has been emphasising quite a bit.

[ 35 : 05 ] I'll finish off by just pointing out one of the significant things that Paul mentions in the letter to Thessalonians and his prayer.

He starts off in verse 2, chapter 1, verse 2. We always thank God for all of you mentioning you in our prayers. And then later on in chapter 3, verse 11, he says, Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.

May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

So I think for us as a church we need to really explore where our points of contact are going to be and how we can reach maybe it's through our work, through our colleagues, through our friends and neighbours, through other means as well.

So thank you for listening and I'll finish off there. Thanks.