

TUTORIAL
3.19

The Church in Thessalonica

Bible presenter Scot Keen commences our study on the book of 1 and 2 Thessalonians in this tutorial. He explains the history of the first church plant in the city of Thessalonica.

Introduction

In this tutorial we commence our study of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, the next section in module three. The books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians are very challenging for our walk with God as they remind us of the importance of being faithful in our walk with God.

Before we dive into the text I want to give you some background and history of the city of Thessaloniki, as it is now called. Thessaloniki, or Thessalonica, is a city that goes back to the 300's BC, and it was founded by Cassander, one of Alexander the Great's four generals. He actually founded the city in honour of his wife Thessaloniki.

In Paul's day there were approximately 100,000 living in this city, whereas now its population is roughly one million people. Thessalonica has a rich history with a sea port and also the Roman road, the Via Egnatia, coming through there. With the sea port and the Roman Road it was a very active city, making it an excellent place for a church plant, which is probably one of the reasons why Paul was there. Paul travelled on the Via Egnatia when he left Philippi and made his way towards Thessalonica.

The Ottoman Turks took control of Thessalonica in 1430 and basically dominated the city until the 1900's. The Greek culture and language were preserved in Thessalonica by the schools which operated there. So it has a rich history and of course now it is a modern metropolis. The most important day that ever took place in this city was not the day that Cassander presented this city to his lovely bride, and it is not the days in which the Greek language and culture were preserved. From God's perspective the most important day in this city is the day that Paul, Silas and Timothy took the Gospel of God's grace to this city.

We can read about this in Acts chapter seventeen. Paul was on his second missionary journey and he and Silas were arrested in Philippi, where they were imprisoned overnight until God sent an earthquake and they were ultimately released. They travelled from there on the Via Egnatia to Thessalonica where they preached the Gospel in a synagogue.

Acts 17

Let's look at Acts chapter seventeen to see the background of this church plant, "When they travelled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews" (Acts 17:1). Look at verse two, "And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.'" Paul's custom was to go to the synagogue, probably because it was a place where people had deep respect for the Scriptures, believing it to be the Word of God. They also lived in anticipation and expectation that the Christ would come. Paul was able to go in to synagogues well versed from his training by Gamaliel. He would often be given an opportunity to speak and he would use their Scriptures, our Old Testament Scriptures, to proclaim Christ.

Now those of you who have studied previous modules will know that the Old Testament spoke of the coming of Christ, and so this was an easy platform for Paul to proclaim the Gospel. Notice verse three where Paul is explaining and giving evidence that Jesus is the Messiah. Paul's methodology was explaining and giving evidence. Think about this for a moment, we explain things because we want others to understand. If we give evidence it is because we want others to believe.

We can gather from Paul's methodology that he desired a response of faith. To state the obvious, often when we evangelise we articulate our belief that people are saved by grace through faith in God's Word. We know people are justified by faith, as we saw in the book of Romans. So it is very odd that sometimes when Christians do evangelism, after they have shared the Good News, they try to get people to do something, like pray a prayer, or make a commitment. Notice that Paul's theology, that people are justified by faith, was consistent with his methodology. Paul's theology said that we believe and we are therefore justified, and so when he sought to see people come to faith, he explained and gave evidence. His method was consistent with his message.

I think that is a challenge for all of us. When we are sharing the Scriptures, we should be trying to see people come to faith in Christ by explaining and giving evidence, as Paul did. Now Paul knew that one of the biggest hurdles for the Jewish mind for trusting in Christ was the expectation that the Christ would reign in victory and defeat God's enemy and establish the glorious kingdom.

So Paul had to explain that Christ's suffering was also a Biblical concept. He explained and gave evidence that the Christ had to suffer. As an example, think about it from John chapter twelve. The question is asked, "How can the son of man be lifted up? We thought that the son of man would live forever." People had a hard time reconciling the sufferings of Christ and Christ reigning forever.

So Paul would give evidence from the Old Testament. When he explained and gave evidence that the Christ had to suffer, he would probably go to places like Isaiah fifty-three or Psalm twenty-two. He would talk about the suffering servant of God, the Messiah, who would suffer on behalf of Israel and by extension on behalf of man.

Paul gave evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you, is the Christ or is the Messiah." He would describe the person of Christ, compared to the prophecies about the Christ, and show that there was a perfect match. The result? Some people were persuaded.

Look at Acts 17:4, "And some of them were persuaded," which means they were convinced. The author of Acts and Luke is using the word *persuaded* as synonymous with belief. "Some were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of God fearing Greeks, and a number of leading women. But the Jews becoming jealous took along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar." We find that some were persuaded whereas others responded in hostility, to the point that Paul and Silas were sent away.

In verse seven we find that Jason and other believers in Thessalonica were accused of harbouring criminals, "Jason has welcomed them, they act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there's another king, Jesus. They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things, and when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others they released them." Jason and some of the other believers were arrested and then released. After this, the believers choose to send Paul and Silas away to protect them from further danger.

Impact of initial church plant

This initial church plant impacted the world in several ways. First of all Paul was able to ground the believers in many Biblical truths. For example, he taught that the church would be delivered from the wrath of God and he taught believers how to live consistently with their standing in Christ. He also taught believers that they would suffer persecution and how to walk in a way that is pleasing to God. He taught them about the events surrounding the day of the Lord, and we could go on and on. Paul was in Thessalonica for roughly three weeks, as we read in Acts chapter seventeen.

First Thessalonians

Now, I want to make a comment about this because many of you are training for ministry. Paul was able to ground these believers in many Biblical truths although he was only there for a short time. I want to challenge you to redeem the time, to use your time well in whatever ministry God gives you, because we have no promise of tomorrow. In the people groups that we may have the privilege of working with, the only Word of God that they will ever hear in their language is what we will tell them. Take this as a challenge to be faithful with the task that God gives you. The believers faced persecution, and because of that Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians. He wrote this letter from Corinth in 51 A.D, and it was written out of a deep concern for the believers' well-being.

Timothy's Report

Paul knew that they were being persecuted because of their faith. Many of them would have been separated from their families, excluded from the synagogue and feeling the weight of that. So Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians to encourage them, and also as a response to a report given by Timothy. We read about this in 1 Thessalonians 3:5, "For this reason when I could endure it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you and our labour would be in vain." So he sent Timothy to find out how the believers were doing and Timothy brought back a good report of their faith and love.

It is likely that the problems that Paul corrects in 1 Thessalonians were those problems that he discovered through Timothy's report. Timothy would have informed Paul of the persecution that the believers were enduring. Timothy would have also revealed that Paul's character was under attack. When we read 1 Thessalonians chapter two, Paul defends his character, which implies that some people were attacking Paul's character. Timothy also identified several problems that the believers there had which threatened their walk with God.

For example, Paul talks about a resistance to church leadership in 1 Thessalonians chapter five. He talks about sexual immorality in 1 Thessalonians chapter four, and he also talks about confusion regarding those who have died. Paul wants to address these problems so that the believers can walk in truth.

Purpose & structure of the letter

So the purpose of 1 Thessalonians is to encourage the believers to persevere. I will develop that argument as we study this book, but for now I just want to give you a little taste of that.

Paul was concerned about their faith. He was concerned that the tempter would have tempted them and that his labor would have been in vain. He was afraid the believers were no longer living by faith, and we know from Scripture that God calls us to walk by faith, not by sight. So Paul wanted to encourage them and he accomplishes this by first of all reminding them of what God has already done in their lives. He does this in 1 Thessalonians chapter one, he defends his integrity in chapter two and he lifts their focus towards the return of Christ and away from temporal distress in chapters three, four and five. He also addresses the major problems which threaten their perseverance in chapters four and five as well.

Perseverance

Paul wants to motivate the believers to keep going, to keep living by faith and to keep growing in the Lord. If you are familiar with Paul's epistles, you will know that they typically address doctrine in the first half and application in the second. The book of Romans is a little longer than Paul's typical epistle in that it contains eleven chapters of doctrine and before the application. The first three chapters of Thessalonians focus on the relationship that Paul had with the believers there and the ministry in Thessalonica. It is largely a reminder of the good things that God did. Chapters four and five are then heavy with encouragement and exaltation. Before Paul teaches new things to the believers, he gives reassurance of the validity of his ministry and his message. This is most likely because people were attacking his character and so he needed to do that to remind them of his credibility.

The purpose of the epistle then is perseverance, and in chapter one Paul will encourage the believers to keep going because they had a great start. In chapter two he will tell them to keep going because the apostles have proved their genuineness. In chapter three he will tell them to keep going because he loves them, and that he sent Timothy to strengthen them so they would not give up or loose heart. In chapter four he tells them to keep going because Jesus is coming back, and in chapter five he says to keep going because we will be delivered from the day of the Lord, so hang in there. That, in essence, is what Paul wants to accomplish in this letter.

The return of Christ

The way Paul does this is by drawing attention to the return of Christ. It is very interesting that every chapter in 1 and 2 Thessalonians (with the exception of second Thessalonians chapter three), ends with the return of Christ. In chapter one of 1 Thessalonians, they are waiting on God's son from heaven to deliver them from the coming wrath. The return of Christ in chapter two is a major driver in Paul's missionary endeavours. In chapter three Christ's return is mentioned as it relates to the judgement of believers and in chapter four as it relates to our glorification. In chapter five Christ's return is mentioned again as it relates to the day of the Lord and our deliverance from it as the church.

We will look at these chapters in detail as we move through 1 Thessalonians, but keep in mind that Paul's primary goal is to encourage the believers to keep walking with God. The chances are, if you are ever involved in a church planning ministry, that you are going to need these principles as well, not only for your own sake, but much more for the sake of the believers that you are investing in. I hope that God challenges you to look back at 1 Thessalonians in your ministry and apply the principles that we will find there.



DISCUSSION POINTS

The Church in Thessalonica

1. For what purpose did Paul write 1st Thessalonians?
2. What are the major points that contribute towards that purpose?