

Thessalonica

The next series of messages will focus on Paul's two letters to the church at Thessalonica, but before getting into those letters, I wanted to lay a bit of groundwork, giving the history and setting of them.

In his second missionary journey, Paul was directed in a vision to cross over the Aegean Sea to Macedonia, where he first preached in Philippi and then Thessalonica. Thessalonica, now known as Salonika, was the largest and most important city of Macedonia, and in 146 BC had become the seat of Roman provincial activities. It was a major trading center, having both a sea port and a Roman road, the Via Egnatia, connecting it to the region. In 42 AD it was granted a measure of self-rule, and had its own local magistrates, called "politarchs" in the verses we're going to read today. That term is important, because for centuries skeptics claimed there was no such position in the Roman political system. Inscriptions discovered at Thessalonica not only used that very term, but even mentioned Sospater, Secundus, and Gaius, who are listed as some of Paul's companions at Thessalonica. The accuracy of the biblical record is validated.

Acts 17:1-9 Second missionary journey; At Philippi, Paul was beaten and jailed, then was released and came to Thessalonica. He dialogued with Jews in synagogue three Sabbaths, explaining & proving necessity of Christ's suffering & resurrection, and that Jesus is the Christ. Then he faced riots and had to escape by night. His ministry there only lasted 3 weeks, but the church that was started there remained a major stronghold of the faith for several centuries.

Let's take a look at his message given to us in this passage. First, he reasoned with them from the scriptures. The word is actually "dialogued" – Paul wasn't simply lecturing these people in the synagogue, he was engaging them in conversation about the scriptures. That is something that you and I could certainly do. Of course, that means we need to read, be familiar with, and study the Bible ourselves, so we will know what we're talking about. Sadly, that is a common failing among professed believers – we're lazy about our personal study of the Bible. We say that we believe it, but when pressed for details, we demonstrate that we don't even know it. You don't have to go to Bible college or seminary to become familiar with the Bible. You simply read it for yourself and spend time studying it. I remember one of my college professors saying that he could never beat his mom at playing Bible trivia. She had spent a lifetime diligently reading the Bible, and knew its details better than he did, despite his master's degree in theology.

Now, what specifically did Paul dialogue with these Jews about? "That it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.'" Notice the first part – he pointed out the OT scriptures which emphasized the Messiah's suffering, death, and resurrection. That wasn't a new concept invented by the apostles – it was already prophesied in the Hebrew Bible – it had simply been overlooked or ignored by the prevailing religious authorities. Paul took the Jews to their own scriptures (not the commentaries by the rabbis) to show what God had said, and then pointed out that Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled those prophecies.

What were the results? Some were persuaded (along w/devout Greeks & leading women), but majority of Jews were jealous & formed a mob to attack. This is instructive for us as we speak to people about our faith. Some will be persuaded and believe, while others will reject what we say,

and may even get angry with us. That doesn't change our responsibility to speak the truth to them. The mob attacked the house of Jason, probably where Paul and his friends were staying. When they could not find Paul and Silas, they dragged Jason and some of the other believers before the politarchs, accusing them of acting against Caesar. This is another lesson for us. Following Christ may lead to people lying about us and twisting our words or actions to get us into trouble. Jason and the others had to pay fees to be released. What about Paul and Silas? They were sent away by night, and they went to Berea to carry on the very same kind of ministry there.

I want to go back to a point I made earlier. Even though Paul's ministry in Thessalonica only lasted 3 weeks, it resulted in the start of a church. I'm sure Paul would have loved to spend more time there, instructing those new believers, but God had other plans. Just as he was directed by the vision to come to Macedonia with the gospel, he was now forced to move on to the next location with it. He had to entrust those new believers to God's care – and carry on with the work God called him to. He didn't abandon the church at Thessalonica, though – he wrote letters to them, just as he did with so many other churches, giving them further instruction and encouragement in following the Lord. Those letters are what we're going to examine in the coming weeks. You and I may not always get to fulfill our plans in ministry, but we can entrust the results to God as we give ourselves fully to serving Him.