

1Thessalonians 12-02-03a

This is Friday night, the 3rd of February, 2012. We begin our study of the letter to the Thessalonians, the first one from the Apostle Paul. We'll take a moment as we begin to go to the Lord in prayer, and then we will address ourselves to this very interesting epistle from the Apostle Paul to the ancient Greeks who occupied the town of Thessalonica.

Shall we pray? Father, what a comfort it is to be reminded day by day that we do not live by might nor by power that comes from ourselves, but by every word that proceeds from you, ministered to us by your Holy Spirit, exemplified for us by the Lord Jesus himself, who also has redeemed us, who is established at your right hand to intercede for us, and will soon be returning to bring us to himself and to move us into that next phase of your plan and purpose, which is so exciting to anticipate. We thank you for this interim time when we are in this earth, sustained by your grace, challenged by sin and by evil, by our own fallen natures, by the devil himself. We thank you that this is our opportunity to learn and to grow and to refine our understanding, to be thoroughly furnished unto every good work, both now and in those ages to come.

And we pray that as we study this book, First Thessalonians, that we will find it helpful, that each and every lesson will have fruitful meaning and application for each one of us, that as we study its truths and come to understand its message, that we will grow in grace, that we will grow in knowledge, and most of all, that we will grow closer to that, the example of faith and obedience that the Lord Jesus himself set for us. We pray these things in Jesus' name, amen. If you have not already, you might turn to the first epistle of Paul the apostle to the Thessalonians.

As we are aware due to various pieces of evidence that this is one of the earliest of Paul's letters. Some scholars think that First Thessalonians, Second Thessalonians are in fact the earliest. Others think that Galatians was written a year or two before this, but it is certainly among the first extant letters we have from the apostle Paul.

The best way to understand this letter or certainly an essential step in understanding this letter is to note two things. First of all, who are these people who live in Thessalonica? And secondly, what is the background of the apostle Paul with these people? Has he ever seen them before? What was the nature of his visit? What sort of history do we know that would help us grasp his reasons for writing this letter and the message that he wants to send to these believers? So first of all, I'll just give you a brief background on the town of Thessalonica. I'm sure most of you have maps in the back of your Bible.

So flip to the very back and look for a map of Paul's third missionary journey. Almost any good Bible has got the missionary journeys with lots of little colored stripes showing various things. And if you look at the third missionary journey, you will see, just look for the far northwestern extent of that trip.

And you will see him traveling through the southern coast of Thracia or Thrace. And you'll see Philippi as a northern most extent in that third journey. And as you move a little bit further to the west, you'll see that he passes through Apollonia and then Thessalonica.

And you can see Thessalonica is kind of in the southern, southeastern portion of Macedonia there, facing out into the Aegean Sea. And from there, Paul continues on to Berea. And these are the famous Bereans who were receptive and searched the scriptures daily to see if these things were so and so on.

So this is where we are. If you look at this map, you can see that Paul is a long way from Jerusalem. He's a long way from Antioch.

He is beyond Asia. He's beyond Galatia and Pisidia and Bithynia, Mycenae, he's north of Achaia. He's in the furthest extent here in that third missionary journey.

That's the visit that he made to the believers in Thessalonica. Now he is going to be writing this letter after that visit, sometime afterward. So that's the sort of the geographic location.

A few facts about this town and the people who are in it. Thessalonica was one of the chief towns of Macedonia from Greek times. This is before the Romans came in and took over.

Back even before the days of Alexander in Hellenistic times. This was actually the region in those earlier centuries was dominated by a town called Thermae or Therma. And Herodotus and Thucydides mentioned Thermae or Thermae.

But around 315 BC, and as soon as you hear that date, you think about the Macedonian Kings. Cassander, the son of Antipater, concentrated the population that was scattered around the area into a town and just kind of built it fresh. And they're not real sure if it was built on the foundations of Thermae or if it was beside.

Pliny sometime later writes that he thought the two were side by side, but a large portion of the population was relocated to this. So by the days of the Apostle Paul, some 350 years later, this is a very well-established metropolitan area. It's been there a long time.

It was named for Cassander's wife, Thessaloniki. She's the daughter of Philip II and a stepsister of Alexander the Great. So this kind of puts you in the historical framework.

In the area and in the centuries since, the name is usually shortened to Thessalonica. The Thess part kind of fell off. So they call it Thessalonica or Thessaloniki, and that's a name that it has all the way down to the present.

You can go there today. It still exists. This became one of the most important cities in the Gulf here, which extends out into the Aegean Sea.

It grew from the time of its establishment under Cassander and became very populous, very wealthy. As the Romans arose and became a power, there was a struggle, of course. The Romans wanted to conquer the Macedonians under Perseus, and so the Macedonian Navy had its headquarters there because they had a nice situation for ships.

But at the Battle of Pydna, that's P-Y-D-N-A, in 168 BC, now think about it, that's about halfway down to the time of Paul from the time of the city's founding. 168 BC, and again, this is when the Romans are really coming up to the rise. You remember the times of Caesar and so on.

In 168 BC, the Romans conquered Macedonia and they divided the territory into four provinces. And so Thessaloniki became one of these provincial capitals. Well, later on, 20-odd years later, they said, it's silly to have four provinces here.

Let's just make them one big province and we'll make Thessaloniki the capital. And so that's what they did. And it became the seat of the Roman governor.

And in practical terms, it was the capital of all of what had been Macedonia. Well, this persisted for another 100 years or so, but when you get down to 49, 48 BC, you've got the civil war between Caesar and Pompey. Well, everybody had to kind of choose sides.

Are you going to be on Caesar's side with the imperial dictatorship or are you going to side with the Senate? Well, Thessaloniki sided with the Senate, i.e. with Pompey. And so Pompey put one of his major bases there because it was a great seaport, great place to get supplies and things in and out. But in the final struggle of half a dozen years later, and this is the time of Octavian and Antony, they sided with them.

They said, hooray for Antony, hooray for Octavian, we're going with them. They tended to know how to pick a winner. And so they were rewarded when Octavian prevailed.

For being supporters, Octavian said, you know what, I'm going to give you your freedom. You're a free state. And so they were back to being an autonomous city state, which means there was no Roman garrison stationed there.

There was no Roman praetor or governor overseeing. They went back to sort of their free Greek, like the Athenians and the Spartans, and they wanted to be self-governing. And Octavian said, you're such good guys, knock yourselves out.

I'll leave you alone, do whatever you want. So they had their own Senate. They had their own governance and they were free and really proud of it.

For this reason, and this is very essential in understanding the Thessalonian letters, they were very much more Greek than Roman. They were very much Roman in their culture. They didn't have a garrison.

You know what it's like if you've got a military base in your town, you know, there's military everywhere. You've got a lot of military retirees. You just, it takes on a different cast.

And they didn't have any of that. There were no Roman soldiers there. I think there was a Roman governor that had his villa there, but he didn't do any governing.

He would just go there and live for a while, but he didn't officiate. And so they were very Greek and very Hellenistic. And so for this reason, there weren't an awful lot of Jews there.

The Jews under the hegemony of Rome had protection. And so you find Roman presences accompanied by, remember even the centurion that Jesus spoke of had sponsored a synagogue and the Romans were very friendly to Judaism until the days of Nero. But the Greeks, not so much.

They were very polyglot, multicultural, seaport town, you know, anything goes. And the Greeks were in many ways kind of dissolute and liberal and free, you know, just free thinkers. Just think of, you know, Woodstock by the bay.

So the Jews didn't really feel comfortable in that sort of milieu. And so it was a long time before any sort of a Jewish presence showed up there. And we still to this day do not know how many Jews there were.

But by the time of Paul, there had been a synagogue established, but it was kind of late coming and they weren't overly populous there. It seems to have been a relatively small synagogue. And we'll see the evidence for this later on out of the word of God.

But Strabo said in the time of Augustus, remember this is during the time in the days of Caesar Augustus, the whole world went to be taxed. So we're down in that time. Strabo was writing and he says that Thessalonica was the most populous town in Macedonia and the metropolis of the province.

And around the same time, Antipater, the poet who was from Thessalonica, that figures, refers to the city as the mother of all Macedon. So it was important, not only as a Harbor with a large import export trade, but also it had a nice nexus because it was a Harbor town, but the Via Ignatia went through there. This is E-G-N-A-T-I-A, Egnatia.

And this is one of the major thoroughfares which the Romans improved and made way in one of their artery highways. This would be like the interstate coming through your town. Well, it went right through Thessalonica, came in one wall and out the other.

So they're right on one of the main arteries of the Roman Empire. And with that connection of that interstate with the Harbor, this makes them just an exceedingly important town. Well, now it gets interesting.

Let's go down to the time of the apostles, down to the time of Paul. Paul on his second missionary journey visited Thessalonica. He was accompanied by Silas and Timothy and he got there on the Ignatian Road and he passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia on the way.

If you looked at your map, you saw that. You can look at either the second or the third missionary journey map, depending on how your Bible's laid out and which one's bigger. But you can see that that Ignatian Way runs through Amphipolis and Apollonia and hits Thessalonica and then goes on in a generally westerly, southerly direction.

And when Paul, this is by the way, Acts chapter 17, where we will be turning momentarily, but not yet. He found a synagogue there. And so for several weeks, he preaches at that synagogue.

And he concentrated, as you would expect, if you came to a new town and here's the Jews and you wanted to preach Christ, what foundation would you use for the message of Christ? Well, as Paul often did, he went back to the prophecies of the Old Testament. Here's the shadows and the types that anticipated Christ as the fulfillment, as the Messiah, as the King bringing the kingdom. You remember one of the last things that says in the book of Acts is that Paul for two years that was preaching and teaching the kingdom, because this is the entree if you're going to speak to the Jews.

More about that shortly. And some of the Jews became converts and many more Greeks because they were just more of the population. They're proselytes to Judaism and a bunch of people that turned away from idolatry.

There's a lot of rich and influential women. The cultured women, the high society women were intelligent. They were well-educated.

They were sensitive and the gospel made sense to them and they accepted it and became believers. There are some individuals mentioned various places in the New Testament as companions of Paul, such as Aristarchus and Secundus and they were apparently converted during this time. Aristarchus is mentioned several times.

He's going to be pretty much a companion of Paul's throughout much of the remainder of his travels. The happenings, the episodes, the events, the circumstances of this visit are detailed in Acts 17. And now that we've got kind of a background, we know where the city is, we know what kind of a city it is.

We know sort of the nature of this somewhat probably iconoclastic Jewish synagogue there and it has had some proselytes, but it's not really large or particularly influential in the community. And Paul's message seems to go well beyond that. But let's take a look at Acts chapter 17 and see what happened during this visit of Paul to Thessalonica.

When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, what road are they on? Via Ignatia.

Who's with him here? You've got Silas and Timothy. There's some question actually whether Timothy was there or not.

Some people think he was there. Others aren't so sure. And there's reasons for that.

We know Silas was with him. He's mentioned in Acts 16, 23 and so forth. But they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia.

They came to Thessalonica where there was a synagogue of the Jews. Then Paul, as his custom was, went into them and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead and saying, this Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ. Some of them were persuaded and a great multitude of devout Greeks, not a few of the leading women joined Paul and Silas.

Notice we don't have any mention of Timothy specifically. But let me just say a few things about that opening paragraph. Do you find anything of note in that first couple of verses? Think about Paul.

Think about his commission on the Damascus road. Think about his instructions from the Lord Jesus. You see anything, does anything sort of stick out or seem a bit odd in those couple of verses? Here's what occurs to me.

And it's in the very first line. It's before you get to the first comma. Read that.

Now, when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, he's on the Via Ignatia. These are big towns of Macedonia. Why didn't he stop? Why didn't he stop? If Paul's mission is to find as many Gentiles as possible and start from scratch, all you idolater, pagan, disinterested, heathen, secular people, come to Jesus.

Here's the gospel. I'm preaching you what the Jews rejected. It's available to you.

Here I am. I'm the apostle of the Gentiles. Pay attention to me.

Are you worshipping an unknown God? I'll tell you who he is, et cetera. Do you find this at all strange? When they had passed through Amphipolis, big town. When they had passed through Apollonia, big town.

They came to Thessalonica and stopped. Why? There is no synagogue in Amphipolis. There is no synagogue in Apollonia.

There is a small but active synagogue in Thessalonica. That's where Paul stopped. Now, here's your quiz question.

Why? And I'll let you formulate your answer. Write it on your slate while the Jeopardy music plays and see if your conclusion is the same as mine. The apostle Paul does not cold call with the

gospel.

Where does he go with the gospel? To people who are already seeking God. Where are you going to find God-fearers, which is literally the word translated here, God-fearers. Where are you going to find, and they may not even be, it may not even be the God of Israel, but they're seeking something besides the pantheon and panoply of pagan gods that they were brought up on.

They're looking for something. This synagogue has a lot of converts. It has a lot of proselytes.

It's got a lot of people who are dissatisfied with the pagan mythology and are seeking. They are looking. Paul goes to towns with synagogues because he figures that's where, notice what does it say in the next thing? Paul, as his custom was, went to the synagogue.

He's the apostle to the Gentiles, but in all of these travels, when he gets to a town, the first thing he does is look for the synagogue. Why doesn't he just stand up in the marketplace? Why doesn't he go to the temple of Diana and stand on the steps and say, all you pagan Diana worshipers, get off of these steps, drop those sacrifices, listen to me, let me tell you the straight scoop on God's salvation, the afterlife and things to come. I think there is a powerful observation to be made here.

Paul the apostle with a view toward evangelism seeks out people who are seeking God. He does not cold call. He doesn't go door to door to utter strangers.

He doesn't stand up in the destitute temples and marketplaces of Amphipolis or Apollonia or many of these other towns. He says, where are the people who are actively trying to find God? I've got an answer for them. Be ready always to give an answer to those who are asking, where is there some hope? Where is there the truth that surpasses and goes beyond this mundane life? That's where Paul goes.

He goes where the seekers are. And what did he do? He reasoned with them from the scriptures. Notice, people who have an active interest in God, people who are at least willing to listen and willing to look, what will impress them? What is going to resonate? What is going to be a second witness to the witness of the Holy Spirit, which they have already heeded and responded to? God has put eternity in their hearts.

The Holy Spirit is convicting of sin, righteousness and judgment. When they hear the scriptures, here is a second witness. Ah, you know, this makes sense.

This harmonizes, this gels, this coalesces. This makes sense to me. So Paul doesn't say, let me reason to you from logic.

Let me reason to you from science. Let me reason to you from philosophy. He reasoned to them from the scriptures because this is the compelling witness.

The word of God is alive and powerful, sharper than a two-edged sword. People who aren't willing to listen to scriptural arguments aren't willing to listen, period. When it comes to the things of God, you are wasting your time and wasting your breath.

God, the Holy Spirit has to be there first. There has to be a response to his divine call, his divine witness, his divine testimony. You are a sinner.

There is a righteous God in heaven who is going to judge that sin. You are separated from him. You need to get right.

He has made a way. And there is either a rejection of that whole notion. How dare you talk to me, a sinner, why I'm as good as anybody else, et cetera, et cetera.

Deflect, defend, push away, suppress that truth in unrighteousness. Or, you know, I recognize that as true. I know I'm a sinner.

I know I cannot, in my own strength, achieve any sort of standard of absolute righteousness. I need help. I need something from the outside.

Then the witness of the scripture powerfully moves that person to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. So Paul looks for people who are looking and he preaches to them the scriptures. This is the model of evangelism.

This is the model of the apostle Paul in Macedonia, in Asia, in all of his missionary journeys, as his custom was. Now, for three Sabbaths, he reasoned with them from the scriptures. Synagogues in the New Testament day would typically have services three times a week, Monday, Thursday, and the Sabbath.

So when it says he went into them for three Sabbaths, we don't know if he did the intermediate week services as well or not, but he was there for at least three weeks. It is likely that this preaching spawned additional interest and there were Bible classes and impromptu meetings outside and beyond the synagogue because these people were finally hearing what they were hungry and thirsty for. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled.

The apostle Paul's there in town. What's he going to do on a Tuesday? What's he going to do on a Wednesday? What's he going to do on a Sunday? Well, he's in town. What else would he be doing? He's going to be opening to them the scriptures.

He's going to be explaining what they're already familiar with, the Old Testament word of God and showing that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead and saying that guy that you see pictured in your Old Testament scriptures, it's Jesus of Nazareth. It's the Jesus I met on the Damascus road. So he is spending day after day after day and he's got three guest shots at the

synagogue.

Some of them were persuaded and a great multitude of devout Greeks. Not a few of the, when it says devout Greeks, these are God-fearing Greeks. Not a few of the leading women joined Paul and Silas.

When it says joined them, well, it doesn't just mean showed up for the next synagogue service. It means they're listening to teaching probably daily or as frequently as they can get there. Well, this is the background.

This is the initial contact that the Apostle Paul has with Thessalonica. Now, no doubt you're familiar with Acts 17 or you've read a little bit ahead and you know that it's not going to continue in an idyllic setting once we get to verse five. But it's time for us to pause and take our break.

I would encourage all of us to remember from this first session tonight, the example of the Apostle Paul when it comes to evangelism, when it comes to witnessing for Christ. Doesn't mean that other things can't be done. I'm just saying, this is the way the Apostle Paul organized his ministry.

That is his protocol. It's his procedure going from town to town to find those who are interested and preach to them the scriptures. I think this is a great foundation for our approach and our alertness to opportunities for witnessing to the Lord Jesus.

Let's pause here and take our break. When we come back, we'll resume in Acts 17, verse five.