

STANDING FIRM

in the Lord

Study
Info

1 & 2 THESSALONIANS BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Thessalonica

The city was founded in 315 BC by Cassander, one of Alexander the Great's generals, who named the city after his wife and Alexander's half-sister, Thessalonica. The city was once part of the Macedonian Kingdom, a rival of Greece and a strong independent nation in the Mediterranean region. But Macedonia was conquered by Rome in 168 BC and by 148 BC Thessalonica became the largest and most important city in this new Roman province. It was a very cosmopolitan city with a Greek, Roman, and Jewish population of over 200,000. The city had a thriving seaport and was located on the all important Egnatian Way, Rome's major East West road, making it a valuable trade center and communication hub.

After the assassination of Julius Caesar (44 BC), rival leaders sought control over the Empire. The city leadership of Thessalonica sided with eventual victors Mark Antony and Octavian. As a reward for their support, Emperor Octavian made Thessalonica a "free city" which meant that it was spared from heavy taxation and retained the right to self-govern...as long as they kept the peace. A hyper-vigilance toward peace-keeping prioritized all decision making by Thessalonica city leadership...a fact that would influence an important action regarding the Apostle Paul and the new church in Thessalonica.

Acts 17 tells
the origin
story of the
Church in
Thessalonica

The Vision

While on his second missionary journey, the Apostle Paul experienced a nighttime vision which featured a man from Macedonia appealing to Paul to change course and come bring the Gospel to their region.

Paul awakened from this vision with a sense of determination and direction (Acts 16:9-10).

While in Macedonia, Paul established two very important and influential churches: one in Philippi and the second in Thessalonica. Both congregations played important roles in supporting Paul's ongoing mission efforts (2 Corinthians 8:1-5).

Paul's Mission Calling

The Apostle Paul was commissioned by the church in Antioch to take the Gospel into other regions of the Roman Empire (Acts 13:1-3). Paul becomes known as the leading missionary to the Gentiles (non-Jewish). The book of Acts details Paul's mission journeys. This map shows the routes and locations of the Apostle's mission endeavors.



Thessalonica became one of the locations of Paul's mission focus on his second missionary tour (Acts 16-18).

An Unexpected Ending

As Paul arrived in Thessalonica, he went to the local Jewish synagogue to discuss the Hebrew Scriptures concerning the Messiah. He spent three Sabbaths providing an explanation that Jesus of Nazareth was the fulfillment of Messianic prophecies. The result of Paul's presentation was that some Jews, many Greeks, and some influential women in the city believed in Jesus. These first believers became the nucleus of the church in Thessalonica.

However, almost immediately there was opposition stirred up by leaders in the synagogue. A formal accusation of insurrection (treason) was brought against Paul and these new believers. Seeking to protect the city from any further uprising, the city's leadership forced the new believers to post a bond that held them financially responsible for any other disturbances. That same bond likely served as a ban that prevented Paul from being able to do any other public speaking or ministry in the city. The result was Paul had to leave the community after a few weeks. There was so much left for these new disciples to learn, but there was no other option... Paul had to go, and they had to continue forward on their own.

Purpose for Writing

The author of 1 and 2 Thessalonians is the Apostle Paul. His purpose for writing to the Thessalonians church was to strengthen and encourage this energetic but underdeveloped group of disciples. As Chuck Swindoll writes: "Paul had been whisked away from his mission field before he could be sure the seeds he had planted in Thessalonica had sprouted."

A few months after being forced to leave their city, Paul sent Timothy, his young protege, back to Thessalonica to check on the believers. Paul was gravely concerned for them (1 Thessalonians 3:5). But when Timothy reported back to Paul that these young Christians were still believing, still meeting together, and still growing in number... the Apostle rejoiced. He then sat down to write them the first of his letters.

In both 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Paul repeats an imperative for these growing Christians to follow: "stand firm in the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 3:8; 2 Thessalonians 2:15). As theologian Leon Morris observes: "Paul was writing to help them hold their ground. This young, very enthusiastic group had been faintly instructed and ill prepared for the difficulties in the present and on the horizon. They needed his apostolic direction to fulfill their purpose as the church of the Lord Jesus in Thessalonica."

New Testament professor Mark Howell sees the purpose of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians as needed counsel on how to be a transformed people that can impact a city. "If a city ever needed transformation, it was Thessalonica. It was a lost city with a pervasive spiritual darkness covering it... The Apostle Paul knew that for the gospel to break through the spiritual fog of the city, it first had to shine in the hearts of the people."

As a result of Paul's instruction, this newly formed church did grow stronger and they became a great church with transformational influence!

Legacy of Thessalonians

“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.”

I Thessalonians 5:23-24



Thessaloniki

The ancient city of Thessalonica is one of the few places where Paul ministered that remains a thriving city today. However, it is no longer referred to as Thessalonica, but is now called Thessaloniki. Today the city is part of the country of Greece and is the nation's second largest city. Thessaloniki still has the same reputation for trade, commercial, and cultural influence as it did in the ancient world.

While there are many historic churches across the city with interest for tourists, there is also a strong evangelical network of Bible believing and gospel witnessing Christians whose roots reach down for centuries.



The Missional Impact Made in Thessalonica

Paul was accused of being part of a movement that was “*turning the world upside down*” (Acts 17:6). Those that brought that charge meant it in a derogatory way. But few things could be said that would mean more to any church or believer than to be considered a part of helping to transform our world.

May the Lord use Paul's missional example, his apostolic message, and the passion of these young energetic believers to stir within our hearts new levels of courage and strength as we seek to stand firm in the Lord and make an impact in our own city!