

# THE CHURCH AT THESSALONICA

## (PART 1)

Jon Macon

In the First Century A.D., the city of Thessalonica was located in the Roman province of Macedonia, north of Greece and Achaia. It was named for the wife of Cassander king of Macedon, who was the daughter of Philip II and step-sister of Alexander the Great. Cassander was the son of Alexander's general Antipater. The city is still known by that name today. Thessalonica was strategically located at the northern tip of the Thermaic Gulf, slightly to the east of the mouth of the Axios river. Thus, the city was connected via the Aegean Sea to all points in the Roman Empire. Thessalonica was also located along the Egnatian Way, one of the greatest highways of the Roman Empire, which ran from the Adriatic Sea (opposite Italy and the Appian Way which ran to Rome) east to the Bosphorus River at Byzantium. This highway connected Thessalonica and the rest of Macedonia with both the eastern and western parts of the Empire. About 75 miles east of Thessalonica along the Egnatian Way was Philippi. About 35 miles west, but off the main road, was Berea. Thessalonica was also at the southern point of the main north-south route to the Danube River. In Roman times, Thessalonica was the seat of the Roman governor and the virtual capital of the entire province of Macedonia as well as its largest city. The importance of the city brought it great prosperity. In addition to the Jewish contingent in the city (Acts 17:1-8,13), Thessalonica was a city given to idolatry (1 Thes 1:9). For sure, they needed "help" from the gospel, and this cry for help came to the Apostle Paul via the "Macedonian Call" (Acts 16:9-10).

### **Paul's Second Journey: from Antioch to Thessalonica**

Paul's second missionary journey began in Antioch in Syria (Acts 15:35ff). Paul took Silas and "went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches" (Acts 15:40-41). They went through Derbe and Lystra, and Timothy, a young convert from Paul's first journey (2 Tim 3:10-11; Acts 16:1), joined them in Lystra (Acts 16:1-3). They went through Phrygia and Galatia (Acts 16:6), were forbidden to preach in Asia (Acts 16:6), and came to Troas (Acts 16:7-8). In Troas, Paul received a vision in the night. In the vision, "*there stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us. And after he had seen the vision, immediately we endeavored to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them*" (Acts 16:9-10). Paul, Silas, Luke and Timothy departed Troas and journeyed to Philippi, "the chief city of that part of Macedonia" (Acts 16:11-12). They converted Lydia and her family, then the jailor and his family, and then were evicted from the city by the magistrates (Acts

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16:13-40). Paul and Silas (and evidently Timothy too, Acts 17:14-15) moved west along the Egnatian Way through the Macedonian cities of Amphipolis and Apollonia to Thessalonica (Acts 17:1). This was in 50 or 51 A.D.

### **The beginning of the church at Thessalonica**

As with the other important commercial centers of the Roman Empire, there were a number of Jews in Thessalonica, and Paul made his first contacts with them. It was Paul's typical custom to begin his work in each new place by teaching and preaching in the Jewish synagogues on the Sabbath days. Paul established that pattern in Damascus immediately after his conversion to Christ (Acts 9:17-20), and followed it on his first missionary journey at Salamis on the island of Cyprus (Acts 13:5), in Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:14-44), and in Iconium (Acts 14:1). On his second journey, Paul now resumed this pattern in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-3). He followed this same method later in Berea (Acts 17:10-12), Athens (Acts 17:16-17), Corinth (Acts 18:1-5), and Ephesus (Acts 18:19; 19:8-9). For the first three weeks Paul was in Thessalonica, Paul went into the Jewish synagogue on the Sabbath days and *"reasoned with them out of the scriptures, opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ"* (Acts 17:1-3). Paul also did miracles in Thessalonica (1 Thes 1:5), which confirmed the word that he preached (Heb 2:3-4). As a result, "some" of the Jews in Thessalonica "believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few" (Acts 17:4). Most of the converts were Gentiles (1 Thes 2:14), and had "turned to God from idols to serve the true and living God" (1 Thes 1:9). Jason was one of the first converts, and it appears that Paul and his company may have stayed with him while they were in the city (Acts 17:5-7). Aristarchus and Secundus were two other converts from Thessalonica (Acts 19:29; 20:4), probably from the initial work done there by Paul. There was a convert named Gaius who was from Macedonia and became one of Paul's co-workers (Acts 19:29), but we do not know if he was from Thessalonica, Berea (like Sopater, Acts 20:4), or Philippi. The new Christians in Philippi at least twice sent physical provisions to Paul in Thessalonica at this time (Php 1:4-5; 4:15-16). But Paul still labored and travailed "night and day" to support himself financially, in order not to be chargeable to any of the Thessalonian brethren (1 Thes 2:9). The strength of the converts to Christ in Thessalonica came through immediate and intense persecution.