

THE CHURCH AT THESSALONICA

(PART 2)

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In Part 1 of this series of articles on the Church at Thassalonica, we reviewed the background of the city and its prominence during the First Century A.D., as well as the background of the work of the Apostle Paul at the time that he arrived there to preach the gospel of Christ on his second missionary journey. We also reviewed the beginning of the Thessalonian church as recorded in Acts chapter 17 and other New Testament passages. We noted that the church began with numerous Gentile converts but only a few Jews. There scarcity of Jewish converts in Thessalonica was not because of a lack of Jews in the city. There we many Jews there, but most rejected Paul's preaching and then persecuted the young church.

Early persecution in Thessalonica

The unbelieving Jews of Thessalonica resisted Paul's preaching with "much contention" (1 Thes 2:2). They were "moved with envy" because of the number of conversions, and they gathered some thugs and "set all the city on an uproar" (Acts 17:5). They *"assaulted the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also; whom Jason has received: and these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus. And they troubled the people and the rulers of the city, when they heard these things. And when they had taken security of Jason, and of the other, they let them go. And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea"* (Acts 17:5-10). Paul converted many Jews and Gentiles in Berea (Acts 17:10-12), but the Jews of Thessalonica heard about it and came to Berea and "stirred up the people" (Acts 17:13), such that Paul had to leave and go to Athens (Acts 17:14-15). Paul preached in Athens (Acts 17:16-18:1), and then went to Corinth where he remained for the next year and a half (Acts 18:1-18). From Corinth, Paul wrote his two epistles to the Thessalonians (1 Thes 1:1, 7-8; 2:17-3:8; 2 Thes 1:1). Persecution had immediately befallen the new converts of Thessalonica, both from the Jews, and also from their "own

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countrymen” (1 Thes 2:14). Paul wrote that they had “received the word in much affliction” (1 Thes 1:6), and by faithfully enduring the persecution, they became “*examples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia*” (1 Thes 1:7-8). Yet it troubled Paul that he could not be with these new Christians who were suffering so much persecution. He was taken from them “for a short time in presence, not in heart,” and endeavored the more abundantly to see their face with great desire (1 Thes 2:17). Paul would have come to them sooner, but he was hindered by Satan (1 Thes 2:18).

Growing in faith and love through persecution

After leaving Thessalonica, Paul had left Silas and Timothy in Berea (Acts 17:14), and they were told to quickly join him in Athens (Acts 17:15). We know that Timothy at least, if not Titus as well, did indeed join Paul in Athens, but Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica. Paul was concerned that the new Christians might fall away from the faith while under such heavy tribulation. Timothy was sent to establish and comfort them in their faith (1 Thes 3:1-2), to urge them not to be moved by their afflictions, as all Christians are appointed to suffer (1 Thes 3:3). Paul, Silas and Timothy had told them while they were there that they must suffer, and they immediately experienced it firsthand (1 Thes 3:4). Paul wanted to know their faith and be assured his labor among them had not been in vain (1 Thes 3:5). Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia and joined Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:5). Timothy then gave Paul a good report of the steadfastness of the Thessalonians, and their faith and love (1 Thes 3:6). This comforted Paul in the affliction and distress he was enduring in Corinth (1 Thes 3:7). The brethren in Thessalonica greatly desired to see Paul as he longed and prayed night and day to see them (1 Thes 3:7,10-11). Paul encouraged them to grow (1 Thes 3:12-4:1,9-10), and continue to obey, avoiding fornication, lust, covetousness and uncleanness (1 Thes 4:2-8). They were urged to work and walk honestly (1 Thes 4:12-13). They were also exhorted to be ready for Christ’s return (1 Thes 4:14-5:11). The Thessalonians did continue to grow (2 Thes 1:3), and endured their tribulations (2 Thes 1:4-12).