

THE CHURCH AT THESSALONICA

(PART 3)

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In studying the early history of the Church at Thessalonica, we first examined the background of the city in Roman times, the establishment of the church by the Apostle Paul during his second missionary journey. In Part 2, we looked at the persecution of the Thessalonian Christians from the time of their initial conversion, and the spiritual growth of the brethren there by enduring those persecutions. Now we look at more of the issues and challenges that the church faced in its early years.

Problems addressed in 1-2 Thessalonians

Some of the brethren in Thessalonica become troubled that Paul had been telling them that “the day of Christ is at hand,” but Paul told them that there would be a great falling away from the faith first (2 Thes 2:1-12). There was also a problem with some who were not working as Paul had instructed them to. The Thessalonians were told to withdraw themselves from these erring brethren and to admonish them to repent (2 Thes 3:6-15). These two epistles were written towards the end of Paul’s second journey during the 18 months he spent in Corinth (Acts 18).

Close relationship between Macedonian brethren and Paul

It would be several years before Paul’s desire and prayer to see the Thessalonian brethren was granted. Aristarchus of Thessalonica (and Gaius of Macedonia) became one of Paul’s “companions in travel” (Acts 19:29; 20:4). He was with Paul in Ephesus on his third missionary journey, and, along with Gaius, was caught by the people in the riot there and taken into the theater (Acts 19:29-41). At the end of his three-year stay in Ephesus on his third journey (Acts 20:31), Paul was inspired by God to write 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 16:8,19). In that epistle, Paul revealed his intention to visit Macedonia again before spending the winter in Corinth (1 Cor 16:5; 2 Cor 1:15-16). Paul sent Timothy and Erastus from Ephesus to Macedonia ahead of him (Acts 19:21-22). Before going to Macedonia, Paul went to Troas where he had an open door to preach the gospel, but Titus did not come (probably from Corinth, 2 Cor

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7:5-7) for some reason, and Paul “had no rest in his spirit,” and left Troas for Macedonia (2 Cor 2:12-13). This was around 54-56 A.D. Paul ended up spending the winter in Macedonia instead of Corinth, and wrote 2 Corinthians a year after writing 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 16:1-3 + 2 Cor 8:10-11; 9:1-2). During this time, Paul went “over those parts” (Acts 20:1-2), which would necessarily have included Thessalonica. It is obvious that these brethren were a source of great comfort and encouragement to Paul, following his three years of great affliction in Asia (Acts 19:8-9,23-20:1; 20:19; 1 Cor 15:32; 16:8-9; 2 Cor 1:8-10), and his disappointment in Troas. Paul benefitted them too, as he gave them “much exhortation” (Acts 20:2). Paul had developed a close relationship with the brethren in Macedonia that was truly unique.

The collection for the needy saints in Jerusalem

On this particular visit to Macedonia, as he had throughout his third missionary journey (1 Cor 16:1-3), Paul took up donations from the churches there to take to the poor saints in Jerusalem (Rom 15:25-31; 2 Cor 8:1-5; 9:2). The zeal of the Corinthians to give provoked the Macedonians to give (2 Cor 9:1-4). In spite of their affliction and “deep poverty” (2 Cor 8:1-2), the churches of Macedonia gave “to their power” and even “beyond their power” (2 Cor 8:3). Instead of Paul having to beg them to give, the churches of Macedonia begged Paul and his co-workers “with much entreaty that we would receive the gift” (2 Cor 8:4). They were “willing of themselves” to give (2 Cor 8:3), and gave beyond what Paul had hoped (2 Cor 8:5). They did this because they desired to have “fellowship” (literally *partnership*) in the “ministering to the saints” (2 Cor 8:4). While others were giving to this important need, they did not want to be left out. This excellent attitude and desire was the result of the fact that they “first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God” (2 Cor 8:5). They did not give grudgingly or out of necessity, but cheerfully, just as God desires (2 Cor 9:7).