

THE CHURCH AT THESSALONICA

(PART 4)

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As we conclude this study of the Church at Thessalonica, we now concentrate on what the New Testament informs us about the church there from the period of the Apostle Paul's third missionary journey to the end of his life. This would approximately cover the years around 55-68 A.D. The church had its beginning in 50-51 A.D., and grew numerically and spiritually in its early years while facing much persecution. They faced and overcame problems, developed a tight-knit bond with the Apostle Paul, and became a shining example to all the First Century brotherhood. All of these good things continued in the following years, up to the end of Paul's life on this earth, which concludes the information given in the New Testament about the Thessalonian church.

Paul's Third Missionary Journey

As Paul had faced much affliction in Asia at the beginning of his third missionary journey, he also suffered much in Macedonia when he came there towards the end of the journey. Paul had been beaten, imprisoned and then evicted from Philippi on his first visit there some five or six years previously (Acts 16:19-40). After that, he was chased out of Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-10), and Berea as well (Acts 17:13-14). Concerning this most recent visit on his third journey, Paul said that "when we were come into Macedonia, our flesh had no rest, but we were troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears" (2 Cor 7:5; see also 2 Cor 4:8-12; 6:4-10). We do not know the details of this persecution, but it did not only affect Paul. Paul said "the churches of Macedonia," which would include Thessalonica, were "in a great trial of affliction" (2 Cor 8:1-2). From this, we can see that the persecution of the church at Thessalonica started when the church began, and persisted for several years afterward. At the very end of his third journey, Paul left Macedonia and spent three months in Greece, including Corinth (Acts 20:2-3). At the time of the Passover, Paul returned to Macedonia (Acts 20:3-6). Then he left and returned to Jerusalem for Pentecost (Acts 20:16).

Aristarchus the Thessalonian

Two Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus, were among the company that went before Paul from Macedonia to Troas in Asia before

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Paul returned to Jerusalem (Acts 20:3-5). Paul was taken into custody by the Romans in Jerusalem (Acts 22:24-30), and then was moved to Caesarea (Acts 23:23-35), where he remained in bonds for two years (Acts 24:27). Paul appealed to Caesar (Acts 25:9-12), and eventually was taken to Rome (Acts 27:1-28:16). This would be around 58-62 A.D. Aristarchus of Thessalonica was with Paul and Luke on the ship from Caesarea to Rome (Acts 27:1-2). It seems quite plausible that Aristarchus was with Paul either from the second journey after Paul first went to Thessalonica and converted him, or else joined Paul in Ephesus on the third journey. Either way, it seems that he was with Paul from Ephesus all the way to Rome, with the possible exception of Paul's three month stay in Greece at the end of the third journey which was sandwiched between visits to Macedonia (Acts 20:1-4). Aristarchus is referred to as Paul's "fellowprisoner" in Rome in Colossians 4:10 and as one of his "fellowlaborers" in Philemon 24.

Paul's final years

Paul was in prison in Rome for two years (Acts 28:30-31). Not surprisingly, Paul went to Macedonia upon his release from prison (1 Tim 1:3). No doubt Paul visited Thessalonica again when he was in Macedonia. Paul wrote 1 Timothy and probably Titus during this visit to Macedonia. This would have been around 12 to 14 years after Paul's original visit to Thessalonica. We do not know if this was his final visit there or not. The last mention of Thessalonica in the scriptures comes at the end of Paul's life, in about 67-68 A.D. At this time, Paul was again a prisoner in Rome and was facing execution (2 Tim 4:6-8). Demas, one of Paul's co-workers (Col 4:14; Phm 24), had forsaken Paul because he "loved this present world" and "departed unto Thessalonica" (2 Tim 4:10). This may have been Demas' hometown. We do not know anything else from the scriptures about the Church at Thessalonica. But what we do know about that church serves as one of the greatest examples God has given about a congregation serving the Lord, teaching and following the truth of the gospel of Christ, growing in number, and growing in the love of Christ, all through great persecution and tribulation.