

Covenant History—First Thessalonians: Receiving the Gospel in Much Affliction

Thessalonica

First Thessalonians was written by the apostle Paul to the Christian church which he founded in the city of Thessalonica, which was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia.

The city had a population in the first century of more than 100,000. It was situated on the famous Egnatian Way, a busy east-west trade route.



Founding of the Church in Thessalonica

Paul first preached the gospel in Thessalonica in about the year 50, while on his second missionary journey. We read about it in the seventeenth chapter of Acts.

Acts 17:1-3

Notice very carefully what the focus of his message was. There are two things which are specified: (1) that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer, and (2) that "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ."

Remember he is preaching in the synagogue; he is preaching to Jews, who have been taught to look for the coming of God's Messiah, his anointed one, his Christ. The Jews have been waiting...and waiting...and waiting, expecting his appearance at any time. But they expected that he would be warrior, a conqueror, a deliverer from the

hand of all their enemies—which at the time happened to be the Romans. They expected a great king like David, who had delivered them, so many years before, from the hand of the Philistines. But the Messiah would be far greater, because the power of Rome was far greater than any enemy they had ever faced before.

This was the expectation. And so when Jesus came as God’s Messiah, the Christ, they failed to recognize him. He didn’t meet their expectations of what the Messiah would be and would do. I mean, not only did this Jesus of Nazareth *not* defeat the Romans; he was *crucified* by the Romans. To make the claim that he was the Messiah, God’s anointed, was *unthinkable*. God would not let this happen to his Messiah. This Jesus of Nazareth must have been an imposter, a poser, a charlatan, a fraud.

Do you remember how he was taunted while he was hanging on the cross?

“He is the King of Israel [*i.e.*, the Messiah]; let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him” (Matthew 27:42)

“Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe” (Mk. 15:32)

The rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” (Lk. 23:35)

They could not conceive of the Messiah suffering such an ignominious defeat. They could not accept it. It was a scandal. This is why Paul said in First Corinthians, “We preach Christ crucified, a *stumbling block to Jews* and folly to the Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:23).

And so the burden of his message was that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer. This was also the gist of Jesus’ message to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Do you remember? As they grieved, he said,

“O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! *Was it not necessary* that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself (Lk. 24:25-27)

“Was it not necessary?” This is what Jesus demonstrated to the two disciples, and this is what Paul was demonstrating to the Jews of Thessalonica. “Don’t stumble of this. It was necessary for the Christ to suffer.”

Why was it necessary? It was necessary because in the nature of the case the sins of man could only be atoned for by the death of a perfect man. And it was necessary also—and this appears to be how both Jesus and Paul argued the case—because this is what Moses and the Prophets indicated would happen.

So “Paul reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer.”

Notice that Paul preached Christ from what we call the Old Testament. This is what it means when it says he reasoned with them *from the Scriptures*. What passages would he have used?

- Isaiah 53
- Psalm 16
- Psalm 22
- Types and shadows of the law (sacrifices, priesthood, etc.)

In going through these passages he would show how they were fulfilled by Jesus. “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.”

This continued for three Sabbaths.

Acts 17:4

Apparently a fair number of Jews believed, but an even greater number of the devout Greeks—that is, God-fearing Gentiles. So we see here something of the composition of the church at Thessalonica. There are a lot of Gentiles.

Acts 17:5-7

Right off the bat we see that there are not only political *implications* of the gospel, but that the gospel is itself inherently political. There is a political claim at the heart of the gospel message, namely, that there is a king to whom every knee must bow and every tongue must pledge allegiance.

I don't get these people who say that the church should just stick to preaching the gospel and stay out of the business of addressing the political and cultural issues of the day. The heart of the gospel message is that Jesus Christ is Lord. Does it mean that he is Lord in some abstract way that doesn't having anything at all to do with life in this world? Does it mean that he is Lord of some things in this world, but not of all things? It's a *comprehensive* claim. And when one confesses Jesus as Lord, it's not intended to be simply a reflection one's personal state of mind, *i.e.*, what Jesus means to me. It's a comprehensive and sweeping claim. It's an assertion that Jesus is the rightful sovereign, not only of me, but of all men and of all things.

"Is Jesus Lord of Caesar?"

"Yes, of Caesar. Caesar himself must bow the knee to Jesus."

[Gasp!] "These men are saying that there is another king, Jesus."

Acts 17:8-11

Consider how these Jews differed from those in Thessalonica. They were calm. They were inquisitive. They were humble. They were willing to consider what Paul was saying; and they were checking what he said against Scripture. This, in fact, is what Paul advises the Thessalonians to do in chapter five. “Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every sort of evil” (1 Thes. 5:20-21). This is what the Jews in Berea did. What was the result?

Acts 17:12

Many came to believe. The evidence was compelling. But notice the reaction of the Jews in Thessalonica.

Acts 17:13-15

So Paul goes to Athens (Acts 17:16-34), and then on to Corinth (Acts 18:1-17); and it was while Paul was in Corinth that he wrote First Thessalonians.

Paul’s Purpose in Writing

What was Paul’s purpose in writing the letter? You don’t have to read very far to figure it out. He was writing to them in order to encourage them to remain faithful and steadfast and true in the midst of the persecutions they suffered. Various forms of the words “affliction”, “persecution”, and “suffering” are used fifteen times throughout these two short epistles. When you read about the founding of the church and you see just how shortly afterward Paul writes them, you can see why this is such an important theme in the letter.

What's the answer to this? Live uprightly and thereby show there is no cause to be feared or mistreated for any wrongdoing on your part.

Read **1:1-10** and comment along the way (note the theme of the coming of Christ 1:10; 2:19–20; 3:13; 4:13–18; 5:23–24. We'll take up this theme more fully next week when we look in Second Thessalonians, because it's a prominent theme there, also)

Read **2:13-3:10** and comment

Read **4:1-12** and comment

Read **5:1-28** and comment