

THESSALONIANS (Michael Holmes)

The City of Thessalonica

THESSALONICA (MODERN THESSALONIKI) was the largest and most important city in Macedonia. As the capital of the province it enjoyed numerous civic and commercial privileges, including the right to mint its own coins. In 42 B.C. it became a free city, governed by its own local rulers, a group of five or six men known as "*politarchs*" (NIV "city officials"; see Acts 17:6, 8). It was situated some ninety miles (150 kilometers) or so west of Philippi on the Via Egnatia, the great Roman highway that connected Rome with its eastern provinces next to a good natural harbor at the head of the Thermaic Gulf. Major north-south trade routes also passed through Thessalonica, further enhancing its position as a wealthy commercial center.

Religiously Thessalonica offered something for nearly everyone. Not surprisingly for a Greek city, the traditional Greek cults and philosophic traditions were well represented, as were various mystery religions. Known for its early devotion to the cult of the Roman emperor, the city even minted coins declaring Caesar to be divine. It also boasted a sanctuary of the Egyptian gods, among whom Isis and Osiris were prominent. (An inscription recording the spread of the Egyptian cult from Thessalonica to other Greek cities offers an interesting parallel to 1 Thess. 1:8.) In contrast to Philippi (Acts 16:13), there was in Thessalonica a Jewish community large enough to support a synagogue (17:1). There is also archaeological evidence of local devotion to the "highest god" and local cults such as that of Cabirus, which during the first century A.D. was becoming the chief cult of the city. Finally, running through all this is a substantial tendency towards syncretism, a mixing of religious traditions.

Key elements of this religious activity were closely associated with civic and political concerns. In the ancient world religion was always closely linked to politics because dominant social groups realized that religion offered an effective means to legitimize and maintain their power and dominance. In Thessalonica city leaders fostered devotion to the imperial cult in order to solidify good relations with Rome. As a consequence, any perceived attack on the cult of the emperor was viewed as a serious threat to the city's economic and political well-being. The local cult of Cabirus was sponsored by the city's wealthy ruling aristocracy, not only because it reinforced to their advantage the hierarchical nature of Greco-Roman society but also because it gave to all citizens a shared sense of identity and unity. Thus to attack the cult—by proclaiming the exclusive claims of another deity, for example—was virtually to attack the city itself. In such an environment, to preach Christianity was tantamount to treason.

The Setting and Occasion of 1 Thessalonians

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5 offers a glimpse of the emotional turmoil Paul and his companions experienced following their expulsion from Thessalonica. Two concerns seem to have been uppermost on Paul's mind. (1) He was deeply concerned that the young congregation might collapse in the face of hostile external pressures. Even though he had warned them that such pressures would come (3:4), it is one thing to deal with them in theory and quite another to confront them in reality. Paul, apparently not sure that the new congregation was sufficiently instructed to deal with the difficulties and challenges facing them, admits to being afraid (3:5) that these new converts might be persuaded to abandon their commitment to Christianity, thereby wiping out all the time and effort he, Silas, and Timothy had invested.

(2) Paul was also concerned that his behavior and that of his companions might be misunderstood—or more likely, misrepresented—in a way that would call into question the validity and integrity of the gospel



way that would call into question the validity and integrity of the gospel itself. Religious charlatans and frauds were a dime a dozen in the ancient world, and the way Paul and Silas slipped out of town in the middle of the night would have made it only too easy to pigeonhole them as just one more pair of rip-off artists out to scam people. From here it was only a short step to the conclusion that their message was no more truthful than they were, and thus the people might reject it along with them.

The missionaries' first impulse was to return to Thessalonica as soon as possible. This they tried to do in Paul's case, repeatedly (2:18) but for unspecified reasons (which he attributed to the working of Satan, 2:18) that proved to be impossible. Frustrated and anxious to learn what was happening in Thessalonica, Paul decided to send Timothy back in his place as his designated representative, in order to strengthen and encourage them (3:1-2). This he did from Athens (where he had arrived by way of Berea, Acts 17: 10-15). After a brief time in Athens (17: 16-34), Paul moved on to Corinth (probably arriving there in late summer, A.D. 50), where in collaboration with Aquila and Priscilla he began to evangelize that city (18:1-4).

It was while Paul was in Corinth that Timothy returned with the good news from Thessalonica that the congregation was not only standing fast and faithful in the face of persecution, but was even growing in faith and love (3:6-7), to the extent that it was becoming a model for believers throughout Macedonia and Achaia (1 :7). The relief, joy, and encouragement Paul felt upon receiving the welcome news is evident throughout 1 Thessalonians, which he apparently wrote and sent to the Christians in Thessalonica immediately after Timothy's arrival.

In the first part of this letter (1 :2-3: 13) Paul sought to encourage and strengthen the Thessalonians, to defend the integrity and truthfulness of the gospel message, and to affirm and develop his friendship with them as brothers and sisters. In the second part (4:1-5:24) Paul sought to encourage and instruct them regarding some specific matters of Christian living: holiness, sexual ethics, social relationships, the death of believers, the return of Jesus, and congregational behavior. This choice of topics almost certainly reflects something of Timothy's assessment of the situation in Thessalonica; it may also reflect one or more questions raised by the Thessalonians themselves (notice the "now about" in 4:9 and 5: 1, and the similar phrase in 4:13) and transmitted to Paul via Timothy (either orally or in writing).

The Setting and Occasion of 2 Thessalonians

In contrast to 1 Thessalonians, we know next to nothing about the specific circumstances that led to the writing of 2 Thessalonians. That it was sent by the same three people as 1 Thessalonians and reflects so closely the language and structure of this letter strongly suggests that it was written not long after the first letter, while Paul, Silas, and Timothy were still in Corinth. We do not know how Paul became informed of the new developments in Thessalonica. In view of Thessalonica's location between Philippi and Corinth, one possibility is that someone from the church in Philippi, delegated to deliver a financial gift to Paul in Corinth (see Phil. 4:15-16), shared with Paul information acquired while passing through Thessalonica. This would explain both how Paul learned enough of the situation to write a letter (notice 2 Thess. 3: 11, "we hear") and why his information seems rather vague at points (e.g., 2:2).

All we really have to go on are the three main topics Paul addresses in the letter: (1) the intense persecution the church was experiencing (1:3-12); (2) a misunderstanding about the Day of the Lord (2:1-12); and (3) disruptive behavior on the part of some members of the congregation (3:6-15). If these topics offer clues to the circumstances in Thessalonica, it would appear that (1) persecution had either broken out again and/or intensified; (2) a new misunderstanding about the return of Christ had arisen, perhaps under the influence of information allegedly from Paul or based on a misunderstanding of his teaching; and (3) Paul's initial efforts in 1 Thessalonians to deal with the matter of disruptive behavior were unsuccessful, and perhaps even provocative. This second letter represents Paul's effort to deal with these matters while continuing the encouragement and instruction so evident in the first letter (see esp. 2 Thess. 2:13-3:5; also 1:3-12).