

1 Thessalonians

Dr. Charles “Buddy” Parrish

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1 Thessalonians – Introduction

History

- Thessalonica was an ancient city of Macedonia by the time Paul came to visit. Its name had originally been Thermai due to the natural hot springs in the area. It had always been a busy seaport as it is located on the Thermaic Gulf of the Aegean Sea. When the Persian king Xerxes sailed to invade Europe, he landed at Thermai.
- Following the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC, there was a division of the empire with the army’s generals making themselves kings of the territory they held. But in Alexander’s home of Macedonia things were a bit nastier. Cassander was part of the royal family, having married Alexander’s half-sister. To seize power in Macedonia he murdered Alexander’s wife and his sons and his mother. Once Cassander consolidated his power, he set about building and upgrading a number of the cities in the area, including Thermai, renaming it Thessalonica in honor of his wife.
- By the time of the Romans, Thessalonica was open to its new rulers and welcomed the legions. As a result, in 42 BC it was named a Free City, meaning that there would be no Roman garrison there and the city’s rulers (including some powerful women) could operate freely within the general laws and customs of Rome.
- The Romans dramatically expanded the city’s dockyards, but perhaps more importantly, the Romans ran their largest East-West highway, the Egnatian Way, right through the middle of the city. So by the time of Paul, not only was Thessalonica one of the world’s largest sea ports, and a city of roughly 200,000, but the busiest overland trade route in the world ran right through it.

Paul

- The story of Paul and the city begins in Acts 17 as a part of his second missionary journey. Paul had received “the Macedonian call” while looking for God’s direction in Turkey. So, the Apostle moved out of Asia and into Europe and soon came to Thessalonica.
- Acts tells us that Paul “reasoned” with the Jews in the city’s synagogue for three sabbaths and soon there was a problem. The synagogue was attended by the Jews of the city, but also by non-Jews, Gentiles known as “God fearers”, who were disillusioned with Greco-Roman paganism and its

inherent immorality. These people were drawn to the monotheism and strict morality of Judaism, but hesitated at fully embracing the religion due to its strict and seemingly endless laws.

- Acts 17:4 tells us that some of the Jews and a large number of the God-fearing Greeks accepted Christ as Messiah and Savior, but the next verse tells us that this only served to anger the Jewish leaders and they sought to have Paul arrested. So, Paul escapes the city by night and makes his way south through Berea and Athens and finally to Corinth. Soon after he is joined by Silas and Timothy who had remained in Macedonia. The news his friends brought from the north prompted Paul to write this first letter to the Thessalonians. The young church it seemed had not just survived the anger of the Jewish leaders but had thrived.
- The young church did have questions though. There was great confusion about the Second Coming and how immanent it may be. They were worried about those who had already died. They were confused about the question of Christian freedom in respect to the law of the city and the empire. And there was the question about whether being forgiven for all past and future sins meant that one could live however immorally as they chose since their sins were already forgiven. There were still slanderous accusations floated about Paul and there were some divisions already emerging. All of these things Paul would deal with in his letter.
- In Acts 18, while Paul is in Corinth, his case is brought before the proconsul Gallio. We know from Roman records when Gallio was installed in Corinth and working backward from there it can be estimated that Paul wrote both letters to the Thessalonians about 50-51 AD. If this is correct, then these two letters would be probably the earliest writings of Paul that we have.