

1-2 THESSALONIANS OVERVIEW

Thessalonica: Capital and largest city of Macedonia, founded about 315 BC (named by Cassander after his wife, Thessalonica, half-sister to Alexander the Great), next to a much older city (Therma). The new city eventually grew and absorbed the older one. Thessalonica was a free city, strategically located along the Via Egnatia, the great Roman highway to the east.

Rome	Washington, DC / New York!
Alexandria	Los Angeles / San Francisco!
Antioch	Chicago or Philadelphia!
Tarsus	Minneapolis!
Pisidian Antioch	Allentown!
Lystra	Reading!
Derbe	Easton!
Philippi	Scottsdale!
Thessalonica	Philadelphia!
Berea	Wilmington!
Athens	Boston!
Corinth	New Orleans!
Ephesus	San Francisco or Seattle!

Paul had set off on the first missionary journey with Barnabas and John Mark, but John Mark had only gotten as far as Perga before leaving the party. When Barnabas suggested taking him again on the Second Missionary Journey, contention arose between the two, and it was decided that Barnabas and John Mark went off together to Cyprus, while Paul and Silas went together through Galatia and beyond. (Silas, remember had been one of the two leaders chosen from the Jerusalem Church to go with Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch, to convey with them the authenticity of the letter to the Churches which they were to bear.)

At Lystra, Paul and Silas were joined by Timothy. (His grandmother, Lois, and mother, Eunice, and probably Timothy as well, had become believers during Paul's first visit; Eunice was Jewish, Timothy's father was Greek, but we don't know if he believed. In any event, Timothy had never been circumcised, and Paul saw to it that he was before he joined the team for the Tour.)

Forbidden by the Spirit from pressing on to Bithynia from Mysia, and then again from Troas (from which city Luke joined the team as well), they were directed instead across the Aegean to Greece, and to Europe. Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke came to Philippi, where Lydia, the dealer in purple cloth, was the first believer. Paul and Silas were briefly imprisoned, having been charged with advocating unlawful customs, and shortly after their release they left. It seems that Luke remained in the city. (The next time "we" language resumes, at Acts 20:6, it is with reference to Philippi.)

Paul, Silas, and Timothy continued to Thessalonica, where Luke reports that Paul preached in the synagogues for three consecutive Sabbaths (though he may have continued for a span of several weeks longer in Gentile ministry, based from the house of his host, Jason). Some Jews, a large number of devout Greeks, and not a few "chief women" were among the new believers from Thessalonica. (Proselytes, they were attracted to Judaism by its monotheism and morality, but repelled by its nationalism and ritual separatism.) The city's Jews did not take kindly to losing a considerable number of adherents, so they incited the rabble to attack the house of Jason. He was dragged before the "politarch" for preaching a king and kingdom contrary to Caesar and Rome

(an echo of Paul's teaching on the Second Coming, perhaps?). Jason was made to post bond, probably bound over to keep the peace, and was then released. It was decided best for the team to depart. This they did, arriving in nearby Berea, preaching there and converting many; but the Thessalonian Jews followed them and stirred up trouble there as well. Paul was sent off immediately, but Silas and Timothy remained behind. Paul was escorted by the brethren to Athens, and they return with instructions that the two companions should join him as soon as possible.

As Luke records events, the next time we hear from Silas and Timothy is Acts 18:5, after Paul had been through Athens and already arrived in Corinth, where he met up and stayed with fellow Jew and tradesman, Aquila, and his wife, Priscilla, who had recently come from Rome, having been expelled with all Jews by order of Claudius. We learn there that "Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia."

But we learn from 1 Thessalonians 3:1, that Timothy had been sent from Athens to visit the Thessalonians. So what probably happened is that Silas and Timothy did indeed follow Paul and meet him at Athens, whereupon, soon after, he sent them back to check on the churches (Timothy to Thessalonica and Silas to Philippi, perhaps), after which they returned to him, per Luke's record in Acts, to Corinth.

Keep this in mind: that up to this point, Paul had had very little encouragement in some time. In four successive cities there had been trauma and discouragement (Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens). This helps us understand his words in 1 Corinthians 2:3, where he writes how he'd begun his preaching among the Corinthians "in weakness and fear, with much trembling."

But then his companions returned to him with the news: the converts were steadfast in their faith! 1 Thessalonians is a letter written shortly after Timothy's return (see 3:6), in response to his report from the congregation in that city, and is characterized overwhelmingly by joy, relief, and reassurance.

The purpose of the letter: Paul writes joyfully, but presses ahead in their instruction, dealing with some serious issues, point by point, it seems, from Timothy's report.

1. The Jewish opponents of the Way of Jesus the Christ were maintaining a campaign in which a principle element seems to have been to slander Paul, to make him appear dishonorable and corrupt, a false prophet seeking a profit, a self-aggrandizing traveling Sophist. They must have made a big deal of his failure to return, as evidence of his lack of real love for them. They must also have denied the divine nature of his message, arguing that it originated in his own mind. (As with Galatians, the same charges – by what authority did this Paul speak these things...?)
2. There was persecution by the pagans (2:14) and some pressure to relapse into the easy-going pagan standards in sexual matters (4:4-8).
3. Some of the Christians were awaiting Christ's imminent return, and were thrown into a good bit of confusion when some among their number died. This seems to have been the catalyst of their crisis, as it were. (4:13-18)
4. Some were worried about when Christ's return would take place (5:1-11).
5. Some of the brothers seem to have been content to live off their fellows, instead of earning their own living (4:11-12).

On the whole, Paul is well-satisfied with this flock, but is not about to sit still. Here we see Paul in his pastoral aspect, zealous for his flock and their well-being.