

July 2, 2000 by Steve Brandon



The Church of the Thessalonians (part 1)

Acts 17:1a; 1 Thessalonians 1 & 2

1. Coming to Thessalonica (verse 1a)
2. Activity in Thessalonica (verses 1b-4)
3. Expulsion from Thessalonica (verses 5-9)

Welcome. This is an exciting evening. Tonight is another step toward seeing the establishment of a church in Rockford. Tonight, we begin our Sunday night meetings. Tonight we are in a public facility for the first time, which enables us to be more pro-active with respect to making our group known. What we began as a home Bible study almost 2 years ago up here in Rockford is still continuing forward. But the reason why it is our passion to see the establishment of churches is because it was Paul's passion to plant churches.

It's very appropriate for us to take a look at the start of a church. The church we are going to look at this morning is "the church of the Thessalonians," which met in the city of Thessalonica. The message this evening will be very appropriate for us this evening. We are meeting up here in Rockford with the same desire that Paul had: "We desire the establishment of a local church here in Rockford." It is on our brochure: "The Rockford Bible Fellowship is an outreach ministry of Kishwaukee Bible Church. It is our desire to see God raise up a local church in Rockford to carry out the mission of the church as described in this brochure."

And so it is the passion of Kishwaukee Bible Church to see churches planted. We began a mere 6 years ago are looking to see this church here established. And my passion is to plant this church in Rockford -- to see God raise up a testimony for Him in this town, to see the Lord Jesus Christ exalted in this town. And we are not there yet. But we have continued to take steps toward that end.

When Paul arrived in Thessalonica (in Acts 17), he had already established at least 4 churches and had set the groundwork for another one. Paul was a church planting machine! I want to demonstrate this for you with my first point.

1. Coming to Thessalonica (verse 1a)

Acts 17:1a

Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica.

When Paul arrived at Thessalonica, he had a plan of what he wanted to do. He wanted to establish a church there. He wanted to establish a place where God's name would be exalted. This was his pattern.

To show you this, I would like for us to pick up the context of Paul's coming by turning in your Bibles to Acts 13. I want to take you back to the beginning of Paul's missionary endeavors.

Let me take you on a brief history lesson. We see in Acts 13:2 a group of 5 men, "ministering to the Lord and fasting." Acts 13:2 says that while they were doing this, "the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' (:3) Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away."

Acts 13:4-6

So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. And when they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper. They went through the whole island as far as Paphos.

Acts 13:13-14

Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John left them and returned to Jerusalem. But going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch, and on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down.

Now, up until this point, we see Paul and Barnabas merely travelling from one city to another. We don't see Paul preaching the gospel or planting churches, like we have seen in other passages. Thus far, Luke has really left out the details. But, when Luke does give us some details, we can image what happened in each of these cities - probably something similar. Acts 13:5 says they were proclaiming the word of God in the synagogues. I say this, because after their first journey, when Paul and Barnabas had a disagreement concerning Mark, who had deserted them, Paul went north "to visit the brethren in every city," and Barnabas sailed away to Cyprus." Presumably, there were brethren there, even though Luke leaves out much of the details to their first journey to these places.

Picking up the story where we left off, in verse 15, we read, ...

Acts 13:15-16-41

And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets they synagogue officials sent to them saying, "Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it." So Paul got up and preached. And this is what he said. And I am going to read this entire sermon, because I think that it is important for us to understand what happened in Thessalonica. Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said,

"Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen: The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He led them out from it. For a period of about forty years He put up with them in the wilderness. When He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land as an inheritance—all of which took about four hundred and fifty years. After these things He gave them judges until Samuel the prophet. Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. After He had removed him, He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, 'I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after my heart, who will do all My will.' From the descendants of this man, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, after John had proclaimed before His coming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And while John was completing his course, he kept saying, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not He. But behold, one is coming after me the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.'

"Brethren, sons of Abraham's family, and those among you who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent. For those who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, recognizing neither Him nor the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled these by condemning Him. And though they found no ground for putting Him to death, they asked Pilate that He be executed. When they had carried out all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb. But God raised Him from the dead; and for many days He appeared to those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, the very ones who are now His witnesses to the people. And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you.' As for the fact that He raised Him up from the dead, no longer to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: 'I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David.' Therefore He also says in another Psalm, 'You will not allow your holy one to undergo decay.' For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay; but He whom God raised did not undergo decay. Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses. Therefore take heed, so that the thing spoken of in the Prophets may not come upon you:

'Behold, you scoffers, and marvel, and perish;
for I am accomplishing a work in your days,
a work which you will never believe, though someone should describe it to you.'"

Notice Paul's message: God chose our fathers and made them great. He led them out of Egypt (verse 17); God gave them judges (verse 20); God gave them kings -- Saul (verse 21) and David (verse 22); "God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus" (verse 23). "Those who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, recognizing neither Him nor the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled [these] by condemning [Him] And though they found no ground for [putting Him to] death, they asked Pilate that He be executed. When they had carried out all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead;" (verses 27-30).

"God has fulfilled this [promise] to our children in that He raised up Jesus. ..." (verse 33). "... He raised Him up from the dead..." (verse 34). "... He whom God raised did not undergo decay" (verse 37).

"Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be free through the Law of Moses" (verse 38-39). Verses 40-41 are a warning against unbelief.

We read their response in Acts 13:42 and beyond, ...

Acts 13:42-32

As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath. Now when the meeting of the synagogue had broken up, many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God.

The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming. Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us,

'I have placed you as a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the end of the Earth.'"

When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region. But the Jews incited the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city, and instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. But they shook off the dust of their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. And the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

Let's summarize Paul's adventure in Pisidian Antioch.

a. Synagogue

- b. Gentiles
- c. Persecution

Let's look at the next city Paul goes to.

Acts 14:1-7

And it came about that in Iconium they entered the synagogue of the Jews together, and spoke in such a manner that a great multitude believed, both of Jews and of Greeks. But the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles, and embittered them against the brethren. Therefore they spent a long time [there] speaking boldly [with reliance] upon the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands. But the multitude of the city was divided; and some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles. And when an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and the Jews with their rulers, to mistreat and to stone them, they became aware of it and fled to the cities of Lycaonia, Lystra and Derbe, and the surrounding region; and there they continued to preach the gospel.

Consider our pattern from Pisidian Antioch:

- a. Synagogue
- b. Gentiles
- c. Persecution

The pattern is broken a little bit when Paul and Barnabas enter Lystra (14:8), perhaps because there wasn't a synagogue there. Nevertheless, we know that the gospel was still preached to the Gentiles as Luke pointed out in the summary statement in verse 6 and as we have recorded in verses 15-17. And persecution also arose: Acts 14:19 says, "But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead." This is like 13:45,50; 14:2, when the Jews did the same. Acts 14:20 continues, "But while the disciples stood around him, he arose and entered the city. And the next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe."

In Derbe, we only get a summary statement of what occurred. "And after they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples," (Acts 14:21). Many disciples were made. A church was probably planted (notice verse 23 in which they appointed elders in every city, Derbe included).

Verse 21 continues, ...

Acts 14:21-26

"they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, 'Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God' And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. And they passed through Pisidia and came into Pamphylia. And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia; and from there they sailed to Antioch, from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished."

The pattern is again present in verse 21. Verse 26 tells us they spent a long time in Antioch. Most commentators place this journey somewhere between 43-48 AD.

I want you to notice that Paul had an agenda! It was to preach the gospel and plant churches. In 15:2, it was determined that "Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem" concerning the issue of circumcision and salvation. They return in verse 30 with the task of delivering this letter (contained in verses 23-29) to all the churches.

At this point, Paul told Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are" (15:36). A disagreement broke out between Paul and Barnabas concerning whether or not to take Mark along on the journey. The issue was probably because of the timing. Mark had so recently deserted them. For, years later, Paul could say, "Mark ... is useful to me for service." (2 Tim. 4:11). Perhaps it was because Mark was Barnabas' cousin that he took him (Col. 4:10). In chapter 15, verse 39 we read that Barnabas and Mark "sailed away" to Cyprus. As a footnote, we never hear from Barnabas again.

Acts 15:40 tells us, "But Paul chose Silas and departed, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord." Silas is going to be with Paul during the writing of 1 Thessalonians. [\[1\]](#)

It is not our desire here in Rockford to "sail away." It is, however, our desire to "be committed by the brethren [in DeKalb] to the grace of the Lord." We will continue to take steps forward here in Rockford, only at the discretion of the leadership at Kishwaukee Bible Church.

At any rate, this is called, "The 2nd missionary journey." The time? AD 51-52? It is this journey upon which we find Paul arriving at Thessalonica. Paul and Silas head north through Syria and Cilicia, "strengthening the churches."

In chapter 16, verse 1, "He came also to Derbe and to Lystra." It was here that he picked up Timothy. They were passing through the cities and delivering the decrees, which had been decided upon in Jerusalem (16:4). They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region (16:6), and were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. Verse 7 tells us that they came to Mysia. The Spirit of Jesus did not permit them to go into Bithinia.

In 16:8, they came to Troas. A vision came to Paul, telling him to "Come over to Macedonia and help us." So, in they went into Macedonia (16:10). Macedonia will be mentioned in the book of 1 Thess. Note also that Achaia will be mentioned in 1 Thess.

Finally, in 16:11-12, we read, "Therefore putting out to sea from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the day following to Neapolis; and from there to Philippi." In Philippi, they didn't go to the synagogue, but they went to where the Jews gathered. In this case, they went to the riverside, on the Sabbath because that was the place the Jews would gather for prayer (verse 13). Again, perhaps there was no synagogue in this city. Here, Lydia was converted (16:14). And, Paul casts out the spirit of divination from the slave-girl and was thrown in prison, because the slave-girl was no longer useful to bring her masters much profit by fortunetelling (16:18-19).

We keep reading in Acts 16, ...

Acts 16:19-21

when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities, and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, "These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans.

They were "beaten with rods" (16:22). The chief magistrates threw them into prison and commanded the jailer to guard them securely (16:23).

You remember that in jail, Paul and Silas were "praying and singing hymns of praise to God" (verse 25). There was an earthquake, which opened everyone's chains (verse 26). The jailer was about to kill himself, because he thought that the prisoners had escaped (verse 27). But rather than killing himself, he believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, was saved and immediately was baptized. This man was the seed that germinated into fruition of the church at Philippi, and he became so dear to the apostle Paul.

From Philippi, in Acts 17:1 we read that Paul and Silas traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia and came to Thessalonica. Paul's travels took him along the famous Egnatian Way. From Philippi to Amphipolis -- 33 miles which was a day's journey. From Amphipolis to Apollonia -- 30 miles, a day's journey. From Apollonia to Thessalonica -- 37 miles, a long day's journey. From Thessalonica to Berea -- 40 miles, another long day's journey.

Paul's travels then took longer distances. From Berea to Athens, it was 100 miles by foot, but 250 by sea. This was several days' journey, depending upon the stops. From Athens to Corinth, it was 30-40 miles -- a long day's journey.

What about Thessalonica? The city was founded in 315 B.C. by Cassander, who changed the name from Therma (i.e. warm-spring) to Thessalonica, the name of Cassander's wife. It had a good natural harbor. It was strategically placed to be one of the controlling cities of all of Macedonia Cicero described it as "laying in the lap" of the Roman Empire. Meletius said, "So long as nature does not change, Thessalonica will remain wealthy and fortunate." Gibbon records that "Before the foundation of Constantinople, Thessalonica is mentioned ... as the intended capital" of the Roman Empire (i.e. the world). ^[2] Shortly before Paul came, it was the largest of the Macedonian cities; there are estimates of 200,000 people.

In Thessalonica, Paul arrived with a plan: enter the synagogue (if it existed) and preach. After addressing the Jew, he would turn to the Gentile. Hopefully, he would establish a church in that city. Next week, we will continue on in Acts, verses 17:1b-4, and learn of the activity in Thessalonica.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on July 2, 2000 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] See Acts 1:1.

[2] NEED REFERENCE