

THE GOSPEL AND AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD

Ben Janssen | Acts 17:1-9 | September 13, 2020

¹ Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ² And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” ⁴ And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. ⁵ But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶ And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, ⁷ and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” ⁸ And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. ⁹ And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

It’s been quite the year. The world is upside down right now, although plenty of people would say the world is finally turning right-side up. Which is it? The answer matters because it affects the way we live our lives.

This morning we are beginning our study through the books of 1 & 2 Thessalonians. I’ve entitled the series, *Dear Thessalonians: Up-side Down Is Right-Side Up*. Because as Christians, we are called to live in the reality of a world turned upside down by the claims of Jesus Christ.

In order for us to understand the letters to the Thessalonians, we need to know the background story. And we find that story here in Acts 17. What we find here is the story of the first Christian mission to the city, how the gospel was received there, and a better understanding why Paul wrote these two letters to the church that had been planted in the city.

THE MISSION TO THESSALONICA

So let’s begin by getting a grasp of the story of the first Christian mission to the city of Thessalonica.

“They Came to Thessalonica”

Both 1 and 2 Thessalonians begin with a greeting from Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. These three men were the ones who brought the gospel of Jesus to Thessalonica. They are the ones who established the first church there.

At the end of Acts 15, Paul sets out on his second missionary journey. Having separated from Barnabas, he chose to take with him one of the other leaders in the Jerusalem church, Silvanus (Acts 15:22, 39-40). In Acts he is called by his shortened name, Silas.

Along the way they met “a disciple ... named Timothy” (Acts 16:1-3) who “was well spoken of by” the believers, and Paul added him to the team. Timothy would not doubt be an asset, but Paul considered Timothy to be his son in the faith (1 Tim 1:2). Paul wanted to invest his life into this young man, to invest in him. He would disciple him as they lived on mission together.

After ministering in some of the established churches, Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia urging him to come over to Macedonia and help them (Acts 16:9). The team (now including Luke, the author of Acts) concluded that this was God’s call for them to go there and preach the gospel. So they went to Philippi, and most of Acts 16 details the story of their ministry there and the birth of the church in that city through a great deal of conflict. With that struggle still very much in their minds (see 1 Thess 2:2), “they came to Thessalonica” (Acts 17:1), although it appears Luke stayed in Philippi.

The History of Thessalonica

The modern city of Thessaloniki, Greece, is built on top of the ruins of the ancient city. It was founded by Cassander, the king of Macedonia, in 316 B.C. Cassander named the city in honor of his wife Thessalonikeia, the half-sister of Alexander the Great. Although the Macedonians and the remains of Alexander’s empire would eventually fall to the Romans in 168 B.C., the city of Thessalonica was given a position of great honor and power and became a loyal Roman city. In exchange, Rome recognized Thessalonica as a free city, exempt from taxation and able to govern itself.

At the same time, the proud history of Macedonia was always in the air. Many citizens in the area longed for a renewed Macedonian monarchy. But the city of Thessalonica was particularly careful to recognize that the freedom the city enjoyed was dependent on their loyalty to Rome.¹ It was a proud and prosperous city, but also entirely dependent on submission to Rome for the benefits the city enjoyed.

The Arrival in Thessalonica

Such was the city to which Paul and his team came in Acts 17. The city sits in a strategic geographic location, a port city that also lay along an ancient land route. Such a significant crossroads of society would make it a strategic place for gospel proclamation and the advance of the kingdom of God.

So the missionary team stopped here and, according to verses 2-3, spent three weeks ministering here. Each Sabbath day they would go to the Jewish synagogue, and Paul would argue from the Scriptures that the Christ, the Messiah they were looking for, was “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you.”

Notice this summary statement in verses 2-3 of what Paul's mission consisted of. It was a ministry of reasoning from the Scriptures, of explaining and proving from what was written in the Old Testament that Jesus was the fulfillment of its greatest prophecy, the prophecy of a coming "Anointed One" (Messiah, Christ). The Old Testament is brimming with the expectation and hope for a glorious future, often coinciding with the arrival of a Savior, a King, a Messiah.² Paul's gospel preaching consisted of the argument that this long-expected age had now arrived because the Messiah had arrived. And that Messiah was Jesus who had suffered, was crucified under Pontius Pilate. It was a scandalous argument, for how could the Messiah have suffered in this way? How could the promised age of happiness be here if the promised Messiah were dead? Of course the answer is that he was not dead any more but had risen from the grave.

So we see that the "bare bones" of the gospel is what Paul preached. It was the essence of his ministry in Thessalonica.

How was it received?

THE RESPONSE IN THESSALONICA

As we read on, we are told about the response of the people in Thessalonica to this missionary team who had come to proclaim that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah.

The Church Is Born

Verse 4 says, "And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women." That is, some Jews were convinced by Paul's argument, but even more non-Jewish God-fearers, that is, Gentiles who were believers in Judaism. Many of the most influential non-Jewish women in the synagogue also believed. It was a diverse group who believed, and by being "joined" to Paul and Silas we see the beginning of a new church there in Thessalonica. This is great news!

The Church Is a Threat

But verse 5 says that the planting of a Christian church in Thessalonica was no small matter. "The Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd."

Why were the Jews jealous? Were they upset simply that many members of the synagogue were being converted? Yes, but they saw belief in Jesus as Messiah as a serious threat, not only to their own interests, but also to the interests of the larger society. They were able therefore to stir up others from around the city, form a mob, and put the whole city in an

uproar. Everyone is against these new Christians. Can you imagine planting a church in these conditions?

This was not a mindless mob that was reacting negatively to the Christian message. In verse six we see that they bring their complaint before the city authorities. What is their complaint against Christianity?

The Complaint Against Christianity

The accusation is that these missionaries with their message about Christ have “turned the world upside down” and that they are “acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” Verse 8 says that “the people and the city authorities were disturbed.” If this accusation is true, then it means that Christianity is a real threat to this city. We can see how Christianity was perceived as a threat when we consider not only the religion of Thessalonica but also its politics and its ethics.

Politics and the Economy

Roman political life was governed by the institution of patronage. Instead of direct regional representation in government, one needed to get access to government through the mediation of more powerful individuals. In exchange for access, a patron’s “client” would provide other tangible goods or services.

The whole city of Thessalonica, and especially its economic prosperity, was due to its dependence on Rome itself as their patron. And nothing was more threatening to Rome in ancient Macedonia than a monarchical rebellion. And here come these Christians, saying there is another king named Jesus. “The proclamation of Christ was the counterpoint to imperial claims as well as a rekindling of traditional Macedonian monarchical longings.”³ If this kind of preaching continues, the economic prosperity of Thessalonica would be in jeopardy. And when you start threatening people’s wallets, religious or not, there’s going to be a strong negative reaction.

Religion and Ethics

In Thessalonica, religion worked just like politics. A person related to the gods by means of making a transaction with them.⁴ But the gods were unpredictable, sometimes bringing benefits but other times bringing tragedy. “One never knew what to expect from the gods.”⁵ The gods had to be appeased if you wanted things to go well for you, though you could never be sure if they were happy with you or not. In a polytheistic culture like Thessalonica, there was no threat believing in one more god. Everyone could even have their own “god” if they wanted to. But these Christians, with their allegiance to Jesus as King, were turning the world upside down by saying that Jesus alone deserved allegiance. No one has a problem in society talking about what they give their lives to, what they look

to for satisfaction, where they put their energy trying to achieve satisfaction. But insist that true religion is only found in the worship of Jesus as the one true God and you are going to ruffle some feathers.

And this is especially true if you are preaching that ethics is tied to religion. In Roman society, ethics was not a primary concern. Morality was left to philosophy rather than religion. Religion, like politics, was about getting what you needed or wanted, so one was expected to act in whatever way was necessary to please your patron.

But if there is one God, and if Jesus is the true and only king, then ethics in a society becomes a much bigger deal. Behavior must conform to Christ and his commands. You start insisting on a Christian morality as the dividing line between right and wrong, what one “ought” to do, and people will quickly become unnerved.

We can see then why the Thessalonians lodged this complaint against the Christian message. For if Christianity is believed, the whole Thessalonian world will be turned upside down. There is no aspect of ordinary life that would be left untouched if the message is true that “there is another king, Jesus” (Acts 17:7).

THE PURPOSE FOR THESSALONIANS

We can also now see why Paul and his companions would write these two letters to the Thessalonians.

“We Were Torn Away from You”

The missionary team was forced to flee from Thessalonica (Acts 17:10). In 1 Thessalonians 2:17, Paul refers to being “torn away” from the believers there, and his “great desire to see” them again “face to face.” In Athens it was decided that Timothy would go back to Thessalonica and to check on the believers there and to encourage them (1 Thess 3:1-2). Timothy would meet up with Paul again in Corinth and announce “the good news of your faith and love” (1 Thess 3:6). Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians “to praise the little struggling church for its perseverance.”⁶

But it appears that in just a matter of weeks or months at the most, the situation in Thessalonica had deteriorated. Persecution had intensified (2 Thess 1:4-12) and the church was believing false teaching and behaving in ways that did not match the gospel they had believed. So Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians to urge them to “stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us” (2 Thess 2:15).

Our Hope for Thessalonians

My purpose for studying these letters with you now is similar to Paul's purpose for writing them in the first place. In 1 Thessalonians 2:8, Paul says that he was "affectionately desirous of" these believers, and "ready to share" with them "not only the gospel of God but also" his own self, because the Thessalonians had become so dear to him. Ten years in, Crosstown, and this is how I feel about you. I really do. You are family to me.

Paul also says in 1 Thessalonians 2:4-5 that he knows the faith of the Thessalonian believers is real because the gospel came to them "not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." He notes in 1 Thessalonians 1:9 how they had "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God." Their conversion was real. Their faith was genuine. These are not evangelistic letters. They are written to true believers. My aim in this series is not to trouble anyone, not to bring doubt to your faith. It is the opposite. It is to encourage you that "the God of peace himself" will be faithful to sanctify [you] completely" (1 Thess 2:23-24).

But just like the genuine believers in Thessalonica, we are all vulnerable to being led into error, not only in doctrine but also in our ethics. In the way we live our lives. The aim of the Thessalonian letters is to call the church "to be an exemplary alternative to imperial rule." Believers must not be seduced into an unholy alliance with political masters as a shortcut to power and influence. Instead, they are to put their trust in God and God's purposes, meaning that they will probably, more often than not, resist the dominant culture rather than making common cause with it."⁷

My hope for our study of these letters is that we will receive the correction we need to hear from the Scriptures. My hope is that we will be a credible gospel community not only because of what we believe but because of the way we live, as followers of the true King who, in turning our world upside down, actually makes it right-side up again.

¹ Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), [24](#).

² Walter C. Kaiser, *The Messiah in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 15.

³ Green, *Thessalonians*, [41](#).

⁴ *Ibid.*, [33](#).

⁵ *Ibid.*, [34](#).

⁶ N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 418.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 429-433.