**Greetings to believers in Thessalonica**  18/6/23

Read: Acts 17:1-15, 1Thessalonians 1

Text: 1Thessalonians 1:1-3

Psalms: 40:1-5, 37:7-11, 119:33-40, 117

One day I asked my local mechanic if he was from Greece. He insisted he was from Macedonia, although this is part of modern Greece. Macedonia was a Roman province in NT times, and its capital city was Thessalonica. This city still exists within the modern country of Greece. I would love to visit one day; maybe I should ask my mechanic to take me!

When the apostle Paul visited Thessalonica around AD 49, this seaport city had an estimated population of two hundred thousand. Its Jewish population was large enough to have a synagogue, unlike Philippi. Paul was on his second missionary journey with Silas and Timothy as his companions. They came to Thessalonica from Philippi via Amphipolis and Apollonia, other cities on the Egnatian Way, the Roman road to the east. We read about Paul’s visit to this city in Acts 17. While in this city he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ in the synagogue, and people were saved. Our subheadings are: ‘The Thessalonian church’, ‘Thessalonian letters’, ‘Greetings’ and, ‘Thanks be to God’.

**1. The Thessalonian church**

Paul was an educated Jew, a converted Pharisee, so when he went to the synagogue in Thessalonica, as he and his colleagues did, he may have been invited to take the reading for that Sabbath. He spoke or ‘reasoned with them from the Scriptures’ for three consecutive Sabbaths (Acts 17:2); their Scripture was our OT. In his reasoning from the Scriptures Paul explained and demonstrated that the Christ had to suffer and die, and rise again from the dead (Acts 17:2-3). Paul proved from Scripture that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah or Christ. You will recall that Jesus himself read from Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth and said, ‘Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing’ (Luke 4:21).

Here in Thessalonica, God had prepared the hearts of some to receive the gospel and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Jews were prepared through their culture and religion, but not necessarily their hearts- just ‘some of them were persuaded’ (Acts 17:4). So-called ‘God-fearers’, Gentiles who were attracted to the monotheism and morality of Judaism, responded most positively to Paul’s preaching. Such people were attracted to the teaching, not the traditions. Culture and traditions are not necessarily bad things- we all have our culture and traditions- but we must not let such things prevent us from hearing and understanding the gospel, as happened and continues to happen with the Jews, and other ethno-religious groups.

Leaving an ethno-religious group is not easy. Jews who believed in Jesus were, and continue to be, persecuted by those who refuse to believe, be they family, friends, or rabbis. Those who preach the gospel, leading to the conversion of a family or community member, will be the target of hostility, as Paul was at Thessalonica. The Jews who did not believe got upset when some of their fellow Jews were persuaded through Paul’s preaching to confess their sin and believe in Jesus Christ.

These jealous Jews gathered some gangsters together and marched to the house of Jason, a Jewish convert who had apparently given Paul a room in his house. They wanted to get hold of Paul and Silas, and drag them off to the authorities. They could not find Paul or Silas, so they grabbed Jason and some brethren and dragged them off to the rulers of the city or ‘*politarchs*’. This noisy, riotous mob accused Paul and Silas of turning their city upside down, of breaking the laws of Caesar by teaching another king- Jesus (Acts 17:6, 7). All Paul had done was preach the gospel in the synagogue.

Jason and the brothers had to give a bond before they were set free. This bond most likely included a guarantee that there would be no more disturbances, and that Paul not show his face in the city again- maybe for the term of the magistrate. This bond was probably all of Jason’s property. There is no report of Paul ever returning to Thessalonica- although he wrote them two letters (1Thess 2:18).

**2. Thessalonian letters**

After Jason posted bond, Paul and Silas left Thessalonica the same night. They continued down the road to Berea where they again went to the synagogue to worship. The Jews in Berea were different. They listened to the apostle’s preaching and examined what they said in the light of the Scriptures. They searched the Scriptures daily to see if what they said was true (Acts 17:11). In Berea many, not just some, Jews believed, and many God-fearers, and prominent Greek women and men also believed (Acts 17:12). There was no opposition to the gospel in Berea until Jews from Thessalonica came and made trouble again. They wanted to get hold of Paul, so the church folk sent him away, ‘to go to the sea’, but Silas and Timothy remained in Berea (Acts 17:13, 14). Brothers escorted Paul to Athens. As they returned, Paul gave them a note for Silas and Timothy to join him in Athens ‘with all speed’ (Acts 17:15).

In the book of Acts, Luke does not tell of Silas or Timothy going to Athens but it seems Timothy did. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul writes of being left in Athens and sending Timothy to the Thessalonians, because he was concerned that they might not have continued in the faith (3:1, 2, 5). They must have faced ongoing opposition from the Jews; indeed the whole city probably had their eyes on the followers of Paul and the Lord after the rioting.

While Timothy was away, Paul moved from Athens to Corinth, where he was when Timothy and Silas came with news from the church in Thessalonica (3:6, Acts 18:5). Paul spent eighteen months in Corinth, towards the end of which the Jews brought him before Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia; we can estimate the dates of Paul’s coming and going because an inscription found at Delphi, Greece, records the date of Gallio’s service in Corinth as c.AD 51-52.

Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians from Corinth around AD 50. He addresses it from Paul, Silas, and Timothy, so these men were with him at this time. Probably Timothy carried the letter to Thessalonica, where it was read in the church, before he returned to Corinth (1:27). Paul wrote a second letter shortly after this, ostensibly to answer concerns they expressed, a concern about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (2Thess 2:1). The first letter also had a strong focus on teaching about the second coming of Jesus Christ; each of the five chapters end on the note of the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The first letter begins with encouraging words and biographical details about Paul’s time in Thessalonica, brief as it was. He did not have time to teach all the doctrines of the gospel, the doctrine of the last things apparently missing out- or was it that this persecuted church had a particular focus on this doctrine. We find Paul’s teaching on the last things most detailed in these two letters. While many in the church today are not greatly interested in this doctrine, I trust you are. ‘If only in this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable’ (1Cor 15:19). The return of Jesus will be accompanied by the resurrection of the dead and the ‘great white throne’ judgment of Revelation 20:11. The believers in Thessalonica, almost two thousand years ago, wanted to know these truths; what about the church today?

**3. Greetings**

As with all his letters, and as was the custom of the day, Paul begins by naming the writers of the letter, namely Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy (1:1); Paul was the principal writer (2Thess 3:17). Paul does not mention his qualification as an apostle, as he does in other letters. Silvanus, also known as Silas, was chosen by Paul when he left Antioch on his second missionary journey. Timothy was a young man who believed after Paul first preached the gospel in Lystra; Paul took him along on his second journey (Acts 16).

The second part of the letter’s introduction names the recipients. This letter was written to the church, or the assembly of believers, at Thessalonica. This church began when Paul came and preached the gospel in this city just a year or so before. But it was not called the church of Paul because no one ever called a church ‘St Paul’s’. It was the church in Thessalonica, and more importantly the church ‘in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’ (1:2). Christ is the head of the church, the only head of the church. Jesus is the Son of God the Father. Paul will soon refer to the work of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity.

The third part of the introduction is a brief greeting, short but profound, and most meaningful for a believer. Again Paul refers to the Father and the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the focus of the gospel. In the death and resurrection of Jesus we see the love and grace of God the Father and of God the Son. Grace is the undeserved favour of God. Salvation is all of grace and nothing of works (Eph 2:8, 9). ‘Grace is what defines a Christian’, knowing the grace of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. To know God’s grace we must first recognise our sin, and repent.

Salvation means peace, peace with God and peace with one another in Christ (Rom 5:1). If in your heart you know grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ you are the most blessed person in the world. But if you do not know the grace of God in salvation you cannot know the peace of God, and you will remain a miserable person. ‘There can be no true peace until the grace of God has dealt with sin’.