

Building A Church Of Thessalonica For The 21st Century | A Study Of 1 And 2 Thessalonians | Part 1 | Introduction | Dr. Madana Kumar Series

Contributed by Dr. Madana Kumar, Phd on Jan 22, 2024

Scripture: Acts 16:9, Acts 16:6, Acts 26:19, Acts 16:11-40, Acts 17:5-10, 1 Thessalonians 2:13-14, 1 Thessalonians 3:3, 1 Thessalonians 1:6, 1 Thessalonians 1:6-8

Denomination: Evangelical/Non-Denominational

Summary: There are several things we can learn from the church at Thessalonica. In the opening part of this series of studies, Dr. Madana Kumar, PhD takes us through the history behind the Thessalonian Church and gives us several reasons why we should study these epistles.

Building a Church of Thessalonica for the 21st Century: A study of 1 and 2 Thessalonians Part 1: Introduction | Dr. Madana Kumar, PhD

We are beginning a series of studies on the Epistles of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. In today's study we will look into a bit of history, set the context and look into the question of why we should study these epistles.

Thessalonians is chronologically one of the earliest, if not the first epistle to be written by Paul, even though it appears towards the end of the Paulean epistles in the Bible. Some studies show that Galatians is the first epistle, and Thessalonians the second. Thessalonica is a city in modern Northern Greece, Capital of the region of Macedonia and the second largest city in Greece after Athens. It is a port city and an important trade route. This city was founded in 315 AD and named after the half-sister of Alexander the great Thessaloniki.

It is interesting to see the circumstances that led to the formation of the church in Thessalonica. All of you have heard about what is normally referred to as the Macedonian call. The church of Thessalonica was formed as result of the Macedonian call.

When we study the book of Acts, we come across three distinct missionary journeys of Paul. The first missionary journey can be seen in Acts Ch 13 and 14, in the years AD 46 to 48. This missionary journey was primarily to establish churches. Antioch, Cyprus, Iconium, Lystra etc are some of the churches founded during the first missionary journey.

The second missionary journey can be seen in Acts Ch 15 to 18, during the years of AD 49 to 52. The objective of this journey was a mix of founding new churches and strengthening the old churches that they founded earlier. Paul and his co-labourers Silas, Timothy and Luke, the author, were planning to go to Asia for preaching the gospel there, but the Holy Spirit prevented them from going to Asia (Acts 16:6). We don't know the exact details of how the Holy spirit prevented them. Thinking in today's context, It could have been the cancellation of all flights to Asia, or worse even, it could have been that their FCRA was withdrawn by the government, and hence the funding stopped. We don't know the details, but we have the word to tell us that there were prevented from going to Asia. So they are left clueless as to what to do, wondering what is the Lord's plans.

Has it happened to you? You make some grand plans, and then everything falls apart and you are left clueless on what is the next step. It has happened to me.

But the good news is that God never leaves you clueless for a long time. For Paul, his new direction comes in the form of a man from Macedonia appearing in his dreams and asking him to come and minister to them in Macedonia (Acts 16:9). Paul immediately obeys the divine command, and makes arrangements to travel to Macedonia. You will notice that this is one of Paul's characteristics. Once he is convinced that the direction is divine, he does not procrastinate. He acts on it immediately. Paul himself affirms this when he speaks to King Agrippa (Acts 26:19). How about us? When we get a Godly vision, do we act on it or sleep on it? Especially when it comes to sharing the gospel with others.

Back to Paul's journey. They reach Philippi first and stay there for some days (Acts 16:11-40). As in many cases of Paul, his stays are brief, but packed with dramatic events. We all know about Paul's arrest in Philippi, the earthquake in the middle of the night, that resulted in the conversion of the jailer and the release of Paul.

It is after this that they reach Thessalonica. One thing to note is that, even though their trip to Philippi and Thessalonica was in response to a divine call, communicated through a dream, there is no welcome party waiting for them in either of the places. This is the hard truth about evangelism. There is certainly a divine call, but don't expect a warm welcome when you step out in faith. This can be seen in the lives of modern missionaries like David Livingstone or William Carey etc., also. They get a divine call, they set out based on that call, and end with hostile reception at the place where they were called to evangelise. A point for us to reflect on is this. How will we react, if we end up in such a situation? We obey God's calling and find that we are not welcome at the place where God called us to. This could be a neighbour's home, it could be different city, it could be a different organisation. On a lighter side, the only entity that welcomes you warmly when you go there the first time, is a new church you decide to go to. This is because all churches are looking for new members and anyone accidentally walking in gets mobbed with warm welcome, hoping that they will continue to come to the church. Probably that is one reason why there is so much church hopping. You start getting a feeling that you are being taken for granted in your church. You decide to go and check out another church, you get a warm welcome, you decide to stay with that church for some time. This is recycling of believers, not church growth.

Well, back to Thessalonica. Paul and team reach Thessalonica, in AD 50-51. Paul starts his preaching in synagogues as he always does. Some Jews and many Greeks believe in his message and the church of Thessalonica is born. Then trouble breaks out (Acts 17:5-10). Rioters drag Jason, their host, out of his home and demand punishment for him. Paul and Silas were bundled out of Thessalonica and sent to Berea.

So, it was yet another brief stay for Paul at Thessalonica, and he managed to establish the church at Thessalonica in a short period of time. Paul then continues his missionary journey. While in Athens, Paul sends Timothy back to Thessalonica to enquire about the state of the church there. By the time Timothy returns, Paul had moved on to Corinth. The news that Timothy brings is amazing and encouraging. He brings news about a thriving church, in the face of persecution, and many other difficulties. 1 & 2 Thessalonians were written from Corinth, to encourage the congregation members who were holding strong to their faith in the face of persecution and other difficulties.

So that gives us a historical background on the epistles we are going to study.

Now let us look at why we should study these epistles.

1. In my message during the beginning of the last advent season, I mentioned that while we celebrate the first advent, we are all eagerly looking forward to the second advent, the second coming of Jesus. The epistles to the Thessalonian church is the best place to study and understand the second coming of Jesus. The second coming of Jesus is mentioned around 20 times in this small epistle. This is the golden thread that runs through these letters. It is important that we study those and understand because we need to get ready for the second coming. We do not know if the Lord will come in our life time, but we need to be prepared.
2. The Church in Thessalonica was a small church just like ours. They used to meet in Jason's house and hence it could not have been a mega church for sure. But despite the small numbers the church made a huge impact.
3. The Thessalonian Church founders left the church and had to move away from the church. Paul preached there only for a few weeks, may be a month. And then all of them had to leave. So, in their initial formative years, the congregation was, in a way, leaderless and sustained only by the Holy Spirit. When I think about BBF, I am reminded of the fact that through its years of existence, we were leaderless, and were sustained by the spirit only.
4. Organised persecution continued even after Paul and other founders left. We can see Paul referring to this in 1 Thessalonians 2:13-14 and 3:3. But despite the persecution, the church stood firm. We are today living in an environment where persecution is a reality. Even though we personally might not be facing persecution on a day to day basis, we are aware of the struggles that many of our brethren, especially in the northern part of India face. The Thessalonian church provides a strong example of standing firm in the face of persecutions.
5. Geographically, the city of Thessalonica is very close to Mount Olympus. You may be wondering the relevance of that. Any of you who have ever studied Greek Mythology will know Mount Olympus. It is the abode of 12 of the Greek Olympian gods, including Zeus, the king of gods, and many other gods like Aphrodite, Poseidon, Athena, Apollo, Artemis etc. So the city of Thessalonica was bang in the middle of the source of idols that people worshipped. Consider our case, especially today. All of us are aware of the importance of 22nd January 2024. Even if we didn't want to know, we cannot escape being told about 22nd of January. We live among idol worshippers just like the Thessalonian Church did. And that did not deter them from holding strong to their faith. Incidentally, on a completely unrelated matter, 22nd January 1999, is when Graham Stains and his two sons were burnt to death.
6. The Thessalonian congregation combined great joy with much suffering. 1 Thessalonians 1:6 says they received the gospel with much affliction. And we can see what Paul meant if we read Acts Ch 17. But they held on to the joy of obeying the word and spreading the word. At BBF, we might not have much afflictions to talk about, but those of you who know the full history of BBF know the havoc that Satan played at different times in the congregation. But the Lord held us together and we are still here.
7. The Thessalonian congregation became a model and encouragement for many other churches (1 Thessalonians 1:6-8). Actually the impact of this can be seen even in the post biblical period. The church in Thessalonica remained strong till the 15th century, though during the first great schism, the split between the orthodox and the Roman Catholic churches, the Thessalonian church chose to remain with the Eastern Orthodox group. Several churches were established and thrived in Thessalonica. So we

can effectively say that the impact of the Thessalonian church that Paul founded remained for nearly 15 centuries. Thessalonica was one of the last regions to fall to the Islamic Invasion that Europe went through and in 1430 Thessalonica became part of the Islamic Ottoman empire. It was later in early 20th century that it came back to Greece, where it is today. There are several lessons we can learn on how the congregation remained strong in the face of everything that was going on in Europe.

8. If we look at the history of BBF we can see that there are several times when we made mistakes. We can take consolation from the fact that a spirit filled church like the Thessalonian church also made mistakes, especially regarding the second coming of Jesus, to the extent that Paul had to do some plain speaking to shake the congregation members out of their slumber. We can and will make mistakes. We can learn from the Thessalonian church on how to listen to the Holy Spirit and correct ourselves, so that we can help in preparing for the second coming of Jesus Christ.

9. The congregation at Thessalonica became a center of evangelism. 1 Thessalonian 1:8 says that the world of the Lord sounded forth from this congregation to other regions of Macedonia and to "everywhere", to the extent that Paul did not have to tell anyone about the congregation. So this small church became a beacon of evangelism by their deeds. In other words, they became the light and salt for the Lord. This could be the new year challenge for BBF. Even though we are small, how can we be the light and salt as per our purpose statement? This is a question that we should ponder about.

So we have several reasons to study these letters. And we will dive deeper into some of the concepts in the coming weeks. In the meantime, may the Lord keep us safe, and protect us from all the evil that is going around us.

Let us pray.