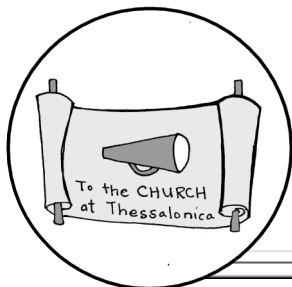


The Church at Thessalonica



God Works through Us

About the Story

In the reading from Acts 17, we meet the people who are in Thessalonica who end up believing this good news from Paul. But when the passage ends, there is a lot of uncertainty as to what might happen after Paul leaves. Will the new believers still have faith without Paul constantly assuring them? Will the church grow, or will the threat of persecution cause the Thessalonians to go back to their idols and their old way of life?

The Point:

We are called to be examples of God's love to those around us. Paul makes it clear that the church in Thessalonica has been imitating him and Jesus. As followers of Jesus then and now, Christians mirror and reflect his love and grace, sharing it with all.

1 Thessalonians is a letter meant for those people. It is a letter of encouragement and praise for continuing to believe in Jesus. It is a letter that is meant to be heard by all of the believers as they gather together.

This is likely the first letter Paul wrote, with Silas and Timothy credited as co-authors. These letters had to be handled very carefully. Unlike today, when many Christians are free to practice their faith openly and with freedoms from the government, the early recipients of the letters were defiant of the Roman authority in following Jesus. They faced a fate similar to Jesus if exposed. Yet they continued to take that risk.

If you have been following along in the daily readings, you have already met Paul and Silas during their miraculous prison escape in Acts 16. If you read the New Testament in order of how it appears, the Gospels come first then Acts. Paul's epistles make up the majority of the remaining New Testament. Even though it comes after the book of Acts, 1 Thessalonians was written many years before the book of Acts appeared.

This story in Acts details how that first encounter between Paul and Silas in Thessalonica happens. Think of it as a prequel to the letter the Thessalonians received. Through Paul's letters, we get a peek into the life of the early Christian church. We also learn of the importance of the earlier followers who were encouraged in the face of persecution, and who continued to have faith in the return of Christ.

Opening Prayer

God of grace, we give you thanks for the communities of faith that sustain and support us. Help us to build bonds and strengthen our community, welcoming the stranger and those in need. Above all, we remember that our community of faith is founded upon the life and ministry of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, and bound together through the gift of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last Week/ Next Week

Last week saw Peter use a miraculous healing as an opportunity to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. This week, Paul uses the regular Sabbath meetings at a synagogue as a chance to proclaim Jesus. The good news of Jesus can be preached at both extraordinary events and regular gatherings. Next week, Paul interacts with another faith community, this one in Corinth. Paul has a much more contentious relationship with this group.

Into the Story

Think about a time you received a letter or email from someone that was unexpected and made you feel good about yourself. Who was it from and why was it meaningful? Is it easier to write to someone or say something in person for you? Go around the room and share your answers!

Learning the Story

Paul and Silas travel to Thessalonica where Paul preaches in the synagogue. Some are persuaded but others became jealous and attacked believers. Paul later writes to the church in Thessalonica, telling them how thankful he is of their faith.

Read Acts 17:1-3 – Paul’s Ministry in Thessalonica

- ❓ What do you remember about the life and ministry of Paul? Some key points to look up if you would like a refresher: Paul’s conversion (Acts 9:1-22), the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-21), and his travels (see Bible Nuts and Bolts for a brief overview of his missionary trips.)
- ❓ Paul and Silas are arguing with the leaders of the synagogue and takes on the important doctrine of why Jesus, the Messiah, had to suffer and rise up. Have you ever had a conversation with someone with a different religion than you? Did you get frustrated, or were you able to have a discussion without dwelling on the differences between the faiths?
- ❓ Do you think the church would have grown if Paul had not been so bold to preach the message of Jesus? Have you ever made a significant transformation where you found yourself advocating for a position you once were opposed to? How did that change occur?

Read Acts 17:4-9 – A Clash in Thessalonica

- ❓ Why do you only think some of the crowd were converted to Christianity? Why do you think that a mob formed in response to Paul’s teachings?
- ❓ Have you ever felt attacked by someone because of what you believed? Have you experienced conflict with another Christian who has a different understanding that you? How did that feel?
- ❓ Paul and Silas are wanted by the mob and Jason’s house is attacked. Can you comprehend your life being in danger because of your belief in Jesus? How would you react if you were in this position? Have you ever been part of the majority group and been aggressive or used your privilege versus a minority opinion?

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 – The Thessalonian’s Faith and Example

- ❓ The tone of this letter is a little different than the way things ended in the book of Acts. Paul and Silas are writing to the community of believers that did follow the proclamation, even in the face of persecution. Paul lifts them up as an example to believers in Macedonia and Achaia. How is the Holy Spirit calling you to be an example in your congregation, your community, and the world?
- ❓ If Paul were to write a letter to your church community, what do you think he would say? What things would he encourage in your community, and what would he challenge your community on?

Bible Connections

- ✚ By turning away from idols, the church in Thessalonica is following one of the Ten Commandments that the Lord gave on Mount Sinai (Exodus 20:4-6).
- ✚ Jesus called on his followers to imitate him by denying themselves and taking up their own crosses (Luke 9:23-27).
- ✚ Jesus has already warned his disciples of the persecution they would face in the decades to come, including being dragged before various authorities (Mark 13:9-13).

Living the Story: Prayer and Closing Prayer

We are continuing to learn about the many different types of prayers using the acronym P.R.A.Y. (Praise/Repent/Ask/Yield or Yes!). Today, we focus on A – Ask.

Prayers where we ask God for things in our life on behalf of others is perhaps the most common type of prayer. Take a moment to discuss as a group all the things that you ask God for as a church community. Many churches have the “Prayers of Intercession” (sometimes called “Prayers of the Church” or “Prayers of the People”) which include a number of asks, requests, and intercessions to God. These prayers usually follow a certain order, asking God for the needs of the global church, the needs of the world, the needs of the nation, the needs of those who are ill or oppressed, and then the needs of the local community. As a group, come up with requests for each category listed above. Then, as a group, pray for the list. You can use this as a template or come up with your own:

God, we pray for the needs of the (church/world/nation/oppressed/ill/community): _____ [list your requests here]. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

At the end of the prayer, you can conclude it with something like the following, “Lord, we place into your hands all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.”

Bible Nuts & Bolts: Maps of Paul’s Travels

Paul helped spread Christianity throughout the Mediterranean basin. Paul took three mission trips to share the message of Jesus with the Gentiles. The first trip was to Asia Minor, what we call Turkey today. Paul took a second trip to Greece and Asia Minor. His third trip was also to Greece and Asia Minor. Paul helped found churches in many of the major cities he visited. Paul took a final trip to Jerusalem and was imprisoned (Acts 20-21). He then was transferred to Caesarea (Acts 23:31-26:32), before his voyage to Rome (Acts 27:1-28:30). Tradition has it that Paul was beheaded while in Rome around 62 CE. Many Bibles include maps in the appendices, which provide visual guides of Paul’s missionary travels.

At Home

- ✝ Write a letter to a loved one or friend to encourage them in their faith.
- ✝ Continue to think about the A in P.R.A.Y. Say a prayer asking for something for the world, for someone in need, and for yourself every day!
- ✝ Take some time this week to research and learn about another faith tradition. If you have a friend or acquaintance who is of another faith, consider asking them about their religious beliefs and feel free to share yours—not to convert, but to learn about another tradition and build relationships with that person!

Daily Readings**Sunday – Read Acts 17:1-9**

Paul preaches to the crowds at Thessalonica. Pray for your church community.

Monday – Read 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Paul writes to the Thessalonians. What would you write to your church if you were Paul?

Tuesday – Read 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Paul discusses how to lead a life worthy of God. Say a prayer for someone you know who is going through a difficult time.

Wednesday – Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

Paul continues his discussion with the Thessalonians. How can you be an imitator of Christ? Pray about it.

Thursday – Read Acts 17:10-15

Paul and Silas go to Berea. If you were going on a long missionary trip like Paul, what would you bring with you? Who would you want as your companion?

Friday – Read Acts 17:16-28

Paul visits Athens. What do you make of Paul's message?

Saturday – Read Acts 17:29-34

Athens responds to Paul. Pray for someone you know who is grieving.