

The Gospel Comes to Thessalonica



SABBATH—JUNE 30

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Acts 16:9–40; Acts 17:1–4, 12; Jeremiah 23:1–6; Isaiah 9:1–7; Isaiah 53; Romans 1:16.

MEMORY VERSE: “We never stop thanking God for the way you received his word [the good news about Jesus]. You heard it from us. But you didn’t [did not] accept it as a human word. You accepted it for what it really is. It is God’s word. It is at work in you who believe” (1 Thessalonians 2:13, NIV).

KEY (IMPORTANT) THOUGHT: Our full acceptance of God’s promises must be based on our faith and trust in the Holy Bible.

THE YOUNG PASTOR SAT OUTSIDE WITH A YOUNG LADY WHO HAD JUST BEEN BAPTIZED. Much to the pastor’s surprise, the lady said, “I need to be baptized again.”

When the pastor asked why, the lady answered, “There are things that I did not tell the senior pastor about my past.”

Thus began a long conversation about forgiveness in Christ. And the lady hungrily listened. When the pastor finished praying with her, a heavy rain suddenly got them both very wet. Eyes shining, the young woman said, “I am being baptized again!”

A merciful God often gives physical examples such as this unexpected rain. These examples help to make believers accept that they are right with Him. But our faith and trust in God will be even safer when it is based on the clear teaching of the Bible. In this lesson we will understand that fulfilled (completed) prophecy¹ helps to give the new believers in Thessalonica reasons to believe and trust in God.

1. prophecy—a special message from God, often explaining what will happen in the future.

SUNDAY—JULY 1**THE PREACHERS PAY A PRICE
(Acts 16:9–40)**

Read Acts 16:9–40. Why did the people of Philippi refuse to accept the gospel? What important principle (rule) can we find in the way the people felt about the gospel? How is this rule helpful for us? In what other ways can this principle be made clear, even in the lives of people who claim to be Christians?

The gospel is the good news of God's powerful actions in Christ that lead to forgiveness, acceptance, and life changes (Romans 1:16, 17). Through sin, the whole world was found guilty. But the death and return to life of Jesus gave the whole world a new opportunity to have the eternal life that God planned for all people. God's mighty (powerful) work was done for us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8). This work of salvation (being saved) was done without our help. It was done only by Jesus, and we can add nothing to it—nothing. But the gospel only becomes real in our lives when we accept God's forgiveness of our sins through Jesus.

The gospel is good news, and it is free. So, why would anyone fight against it? The answer is simple: to accept the gospel means to put aside trust in self and in worldly things such as money, power, and making others think we are attractive. Money, sex, and power are good things when we follow God's will and ways. But when

people hold on to these worldly things instead of the gospel, the gospel and those who preach it become a threat.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:1, 2. Paul and Silas enter Thessalonica in pain. Their bodies show the cuts and bruises they received from their heavy beating and imprisonment in Philippi (Acts 16:22–24). But examples of the great power of God (Acts 16:26, 30, 36) strengthened Paul's and Silas' hearts. They boldly enter the synagogue (Jewish place of worship) at Thessalonica, even though they are in pain. They speak again of the Messiah (Chosen One) who changed their lives and sent them on a mission to preach the good news in places where the gospel had not been heard before.

What are the things of the world that can pull us away from the Lord if we are not careful? Why, then, is it so important to keep the Cross and its meaning always in the center of our thoughts, especially when the pull of the world seems the strongest?



The gospel is good news, and it is free.

MONDAY—JULY 2**PAUL'S PREACHING PLAN
(Acts 17:1–3)**

What does Acts 17:1–3 tell us about the where, the when, and the how of Paul's preaching plan in Thessalonica?

First Thessalonians was among Paul's earliest letters. But Paul's missionary plan was well developed by the time he arrived in Thessalonica.

The first step in Paul's missionary plan was to attend the local synagogue (Jewish place of worship) on the Sabbath. This was natural because the Sabbath was a good time to reach many Jews. But more than just a missionary plan was at work here. Paul would have taken time for prayer and worship on the Sabbath even if no Jews or no synagogue had been available (read Acts 16:13).

This first step makes sense because it was rather common in those days for Jews to invite synagogue visitors to speak. This was especially true if the speakers had lived in Jerusalem, as Paul and Silas had. The Jewish group would have been eager to hear news of Jewish life in other places. They also would have been interested in any new ideas the visitors had discovered from their study of the Bible. So, Paul's plan was a natural fit with the culture of the synagogue.

The second step in Paul's plan was to preach directly from the Old Testament. When Paul began to talk

to the Jews about Christ, he also began with a topic of great interest to them at that time, the Messiah. The Greek word for the Messiah, "the Christ," means "the Messiah" in the Hebrew. (Read Acts 17:3.) Using verses from the Old Testament, Paul showed that the Messiah would first have to suffer before He would receive the glory (praise and honor) that the Jews expected. In other words, the popular, glorious (full of beauty and honor) example of the Messiah's mission was only part of the picture. When the Messiah first appeared, He was to be a suffering servant rather than a victorious king.

Third, after Paul finished presenting a picture of the Messiah to the people in the synagogue, he went on to tell the story of Jesus. Paul explained how Jesus' life followed the pattern of the Bible prophecy that he had just shared with them. Most likely, Paul added stories about his own past doubts and also spoke of the powerful experience with the risen Christ. According to Luke (Luke 24:25–27, 44–46), Paul's preaching plan in Thessalonica followed the same pattern that Jesus had used with the disciples after His return to life.

Notice that Paul tried to reach people where they were and with subjects they knew something about. Why is this plan so important? Think about the people whom you want to reach. How can you learn to start where they are and not where you are?



Paul's missionary plan had three steps:
 1. Visit a local church. 2. Preach from the Scriptures. 3. Tell the story of Jesus.

TUESDAY—JULY 3

TWO VIEWS OF THE MESSIAH (Jeremiah 23:1–6)

Since early Bible times, readers of the Old Testament have noticed different ways of understanding the prophecies pointing toward the Messiah. Most Jews and early Christians had two important understandings of prophecies about the Messiah. On the one hand, the people knew there were verses that pointed toward a Victorious King who would bring justice and cause Israel to rule over all the earth. On the other hand, the people also knew there were verses that suggested the Messiah would be a Suffering Servant, unaccepted by the people. Many people did not understand that all these verses were talking about the same Person but just in different parts of His work at different times.

Read Jeremiah 23:1–6; Isaiah 9:1–7; Isaiah 53:1–6; and Zechariah 9:9. Make a list of character traits² of the future Savior that you find in these verses. What kind of opposing opinions appear here?

These verses were puzzling in view of the Messiah's coming. On the one hand, the verses describing Jesus as the Victorious King had no hint of suffering. But, on the other hand, the Suffering Servant verses usually described the Messiah as having no power or worldly authority. The Jews of Jesus' day solved this problem by seeing the Suffering Servant as a symbol of the whole nation while it was in slavery under Babylon. By misunderstanding these texts, many Jews expected the Messiah to be a Victorious King. This King, like David, would throw off Israel's enemies and restore (bring back) Israel's place among the nations.

Of course, a major problem with forgetting the Suffering Servant verses is that these verses are important Old Testament verses. They join together the two important roles (parts) of the Messiah. They describe the same person. What is less clear when we first look at these roles is whether they happen at the same time or one after the other.

As shown in Acts 17:2, 3, Paul walked the Jews of Thessalonica through these Messianic Old Testament verses and explored their significance with them.

² character traits—qualities or parts of someone that tell us what kind of person he or she is.

In Bible times, the Jews were confused about the first coming of the Messiah. Today, we find much confusion about the Second Coming too. What should this tell us about how we need to understand Bible truth? Why can false doctrine (teachings) cause much of the problem?



The promises about Jesus from the Bible show that He is both the Suffering Servant and the Victorious King.

WEDNESDAY—JULY 4

SUFFERING BEFORE GLORY (Isaiah 53)

Paul, like Jesus, studied the Old Testament. Both understood that the Messiah would “have to suffer these things and then enter his glory” (Luke 24:26, NIV). The “have to” of Luke 24:26 uses almost the same word as Acts 17:3 (NIV), which is the verse where Paul says the Messiah “had to suffer.” Jesus and Paul understood that the important idea of suffering before glory was written in the prophecies long before they came true. The question is, then, what Old Testament verses

did Jesus and Paul read to reach this conclusion?

Jesus and Paul probably noticed that the most important leaders in the Old Testament had a long time of suffering before they entered into the glory period of their lives. Joseph spent some 13 years in prison before becoming prime minister (ruler) of Egypt. Moses spent 40 years chasing sheep through the desert before taking up his role (duty) as the powerful leader of the Exodus. David spent many years as an escapee (someone who has escaped) in foreign lands before being promoted to the throne as king. Daniel was a prisoner of war, and was even sentenced to death, before his promotion to the position (job) of prime minister of Babylon. In the stories of these Old Testament servants of God, there also are examples of the Messiah, who would also suffer before being promoted to His role as King.

The closing argument of this New Testament belief is found in the most well-known Old Testament text in the New Testament: Isaiah 53. The Suffering Servant of Isaiah was hated, unaccepted, and sorrowful (Isaiah 53:2–4). Like a sanctuary (house of God) lamb, Jesus was killed because of our sins (Isaiah 53:5–7), according to the Lord’s will (Isaiah 53:8–10). But the verse also says that “after he has suffered” (Isaiah 53:11, NIV), Jesus would save many from sin and receive a rich harvest (Isaiah 53:12).

For the writers of the New Testament, Isaiah 53 was the important key to the Messiah’s work. Paul would certainly have preached this chapter in

Thessalonica. According to Isaiah 53, the Messiah would not appear kingly or powerful at the time of His first coming. In fact, He would be unaccepted by many of His own people. But His not being accepted would happen before He became the glorious Messiah that the Jews expected. With this in mind, Paul was able to show that Jesus was really the Messiah of whom the Old Testament had foretold.

Prayerfully study Isaiah 53. Then think deeply about what the Lord, our Creator, did so that you can have eternal life. Think, too, about what this amazing truth tells us about the character (who God is) of God and why Christ should be number one in our lives.



Jesus' life shows us that before there is glory (honor and praise) there is suffering.

THURSDAY—JULY 5

A CHURCH IS BORN (Acts 17:1–4)

According to Acts 17:1–4, 12, what groups of people made up the basis (foundation) of the Thessalonian church?

A part of Paul's missionary plan was "to [go to] the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16, ESV). During Paul's ministry (work done for God), the Jews regularly received the first opportunity to hear and accept the gospel. And, according to the Bible, many Jews in Paul's time did accept Jesus as the Messiah. But later, the church started to backslide (fall away from God) and refused to accept the law, especially the Sabbath. It became harder and harder for Jews to accept Jesus as the Messiah because, after all, what Messiah would remove the law, especially the Sabbath?

As the verses show, some of the Jews in Thessalonica accepted Paul's arguments from Messianic (about the Messiah) verses about the story of Jesus. One of these Jews, Aristarchus, was later a coworker with Paul and even became a fellow prisoner. (Read Colossians 4:10, 11 and Acts 20:4.) Another, Jason, was rich enough to house the church at his home after this group of Christian believers were no longer welcome in the synagogue. Jason also gave a part of the bond money needed to prevent Paul's arrest. (Read Acts 17:4–9.)

The "God-fearing Greeks" (Acts 17:4, NIV) were Gentiles (non-Jews) who became interested in the Jewish religion. They attended the synagogue but did not convert.³ This happened a lot in Paul's day. These Gentiles became a natural bridge (way) for Paul to reach those Gentiles who had no knowledge at all of Judaism or the Old Testament.

3. convert—become a true follower of Christ.

There were many well-to-do Jews in the original church in Thessalonica, as shown in Acts 17 (for example, in verse 12). And many important Greeks also became believers of this church. But by the time 1 Thessalonians was written, the church of Thessalonica was largely made up of Gentiles (1 Thessalonians 1:9) from the working classes (1 Thessalonians 4:11).

What we can understand here is that the gospel is for all people, all classes, and all races, whether they are rich or poor, Greek or Jew. Christ's death was for the whole world. That is why our message, as Seventh-day Adventists, is for the whole world (Revelation 14:6), no matter what a person's race, nationality, education, or economic standing (how much money someone has compared to someone else) is. It is so important that we remember this principle (important rule) always. It is so important that we not become so wrapped up in (think mainly of) ourselves and what God has done for us in the past that we forget to reach out to others.

FRIDAY—JULY 6

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Read Ellen G. White, "Salvation to the Jews," page 380, "Thessalonica," pages 221, 222–229, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

"In the closing work of the gospel, special work is to be done for classes of forgotten people. God expects His messengers to take special interest in the Jewish people whom they find in all parts of the earth. . . . As the Jews

see the Christ as described in the Old Testament verses, they will see how clearly the New Testament explains the Old. Then their interest in Christ will wake up, and they will recognize Christ as the Savior of the world. Many will by faith receive Christ as their Savior."

—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, page 381.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

① Paul approached the Jews of his day on the basis of the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. How much is such a method useful today with the Jews, who might not even know the Old Testament prophecies? What other kinds of methods should be considered for worldly Jews, as well as for any groups of people who do not know Christ today?

② How can the prophecies of the Bible be used to reach your friends and neighbors better? What methods should you use with people who do not believe in the authority of the Bible? For example, how could Daniel 2 help a nonbeliever start to trust the Bible as the Word of God?

SUMMARY: Many important points have been made in this opening week. What we should come away with, more than anything else, is just how important the Word of God is to our lives, our mission, and our witness. We need to know the Bible truths very well so that we can be better witnesses.