

## Thessalonica in Paul's Day



### SABBATH—JULY 14

**READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON:** John 11:48–50; 1 John 2:15–17; 1 Corinthians 9:19–27; John 3:3–8; 1 Corinthians 16:19.

**MEMORY VERSE:** “I am free. I don't [do not] belong to anyone. But I make myself a slave to everyone. I do it to win as many as I can to Christ” (1 Corinthians 9:19, NIV).

**KEY (IMPORTANT) THOUGHT:** A short study of the lifestyle of the Thessalonians during Bible times shows that Paul was very well prepared in presenting his message to the citizens of Thessalonica.

**THE PRIMARY FOCUS OF (MAIN PLACE TO PUT OUR ATTENTION) THIS LESSON WILL BE A REVIEW OF WHAT HISTORY, LITERATURE (BOOKS), AND ARCHAEOLOGY (THE STUDY OF ITEMS DUG UP FROM UNDER THE GROUND) TELL US ABOUT THESSALONICA.**

This information is important for two reasons. First, it helps us to understand how Paul's hearers and readers would have understood him. In so doing, it makes the meaning of what Paul wrote clearer. The material also can help us to better understand the influence Paul's words had on both church and society.

Second, the more we know about the ideas and beliefs of the Thessalonians, the better we can understand what Paul was trying to say. To preach the gospel, Paul also would have had to correct wrong ideas.

This lesson sets the stage for our reading of 1 and 2 Thessalonians during the rest of this quarter's lessons.

**SUNDAY—JULY 15****THE ROMANS ARRIVE IN THESSALONICA (John 11:48–50)**

**Read John 11:48–50. How did the Romans influence politics and religion in Jerusalem and Palestine during the first century?**

Around 168 B.C. during a civil war among the Greek city-states (independent cities), the Thessalonians invited the Romans to take over their city and protect it from local enemies. The Romans rewarded Thessalonica for being on the “right side” of the civil war. The Romans let Thessalonica govern itself. It became a free city within the empire. This means the city could control its local affairs (business that occurs in the same area) and future. As a result, the wealthier and more powerful groups in the city could continue life much as they had before. So, the wealthy were strong supporters of Rome and its emperor (ruler) in Paul's day. But life was not so pleasant for the common people, especially the working classes, for three reasons.

First, the Romans brought economic (having to do with money) hardships. The usual markets (businesses) were upset by war and changing governments. These events hit the poorer classes harder than they did the wealthier classes. But after a while, these problems became less noticeable.

Second, Thessalonica remained

largely (mainly) self-governing. But people still felt powerless against Rome. Some local leaders were replaced by strangers who were more loyal to Rome than to Thessalonica. So, foreign rule was not popular for long.

Third, the Romans took advantage of (selfishly used) the Thessalonians. For example, the Romans required taxes. Percentages of crops, minerals, and other local products were to be taxed, and the money was sent to Rome to support the larger needs of the empire.

So, Thessalonica was quite a bit better off than Jerusalem. But Roman rule caused stresses (problems) in local communities. In Thessalonica, those stresses were hard on the poor and the working classes. As years passed, these Thessalonians became more and more frustrated with the situation and wanted a change.

**How does the current political situation in your community influence the work of the church? What kinds of things should your church do to improve its place and standing in the larger community?**

**MONDAY—JULY 16****A PAGAN<sup>1</sup> ANSWER TO THE ROMAN PROBLEM (1 John 2:15–17)**

The pagans had an answer to the Thessalonians' problem of being powerless. It was a spiritual movement

1. pagan—a person who is an idol worshiper.

called the Cabirus cult.<sup>2</sup> The cult was started by a man named Cabirus who spoke up for the poor. But he was murdered by his two brothers. He was buried like a king. And the people looked upon him as a murdered hero.

The lower classes believed that Cabirus had miraculous powers while he was alive. They also believed that from time to time Cabirus quietly returned to life in order to help people. They believed that Cabirus would return to bring justice to the poor and make the city independent and great again. The Cabirus cult gave hope to the poor, much in the same way that the Bible gives us hope.

Things get even more interesting when we discover that the worship of Cabirus included blood sacrifices to honor his death. In much the same way that Paul did, the Thessalonians spoke of “forgiveness by his blood.” What this means is that they received pardon from guilt. The cult also did away with differences between people, such as the rich and the poor. In the Cabirus cult all groups of society were treated equally.

But there was one more thing. When the emperor cult<sup>3</sup> arose in the time of Caesar Augustus, the Romans taught that Cabirus had already come in the person of Caesar. In other words, Caesar was meant to replace Cabirus in the hearts of the people who were under Roman rule. As a result, the spiritual life of Thessalonica no longer gave peace and hope for the working

classes. The common people (lower classes) found themselves without a meaningful religion. The emperor cult also meant that if any person representing the real Cabirus were to arrive in the city, he would be seen as a threat to Roman power in Thessalonica.

The Roman response to the Cabirus cult left an empty place in the hearts of the people. This is the empty place that the gospel alone could fill. Christ was the true fulfillment (completion) of the hopes and dreams that the Thessalonians had put on Cabirus. The gospel gave the Thessalonians both inner peace in the present and hope for the eternal future, beginning with the Second Coming.

**Read 1 John 2:15–17. (Read also Ecclesiastes 2:1–11.) What special truths are being shown here? What hope do these words offer that the things of this world do not offer?**



**Christ was the true fulfillment of the hopes the Thessalonians had put on Cabirus.**

2. cult—false religious movement.

3. emperor cult— a false religious movement in which a ruler is believed to be a god.

**TUESDAY—JULY 17****THE GOSPEL IN THESSALONICA  
(1 Corinthians 9:19–27)**

From what we learned yesterday, it is not difficult (hard) to see why many non-Jews in Thessalonica accepted the gospel quickly. We do not know if Paul knew about the Cabirus cult before arriving in the city. But his messages about the Messiah (Chosen One) went very well with the spiritual desires of the local pagans.

When the gospel came to Thessalonica, the working classes of the city were ready for it. And they accepted it in large numbers. They were also ready for extreme<sup>4</sup> interpretations (explanations) of the gospel. The Cabirus cult had prepared the people for a spirit of rebellion (war) against government. This may have been an example of the wrong actions that Paul speaks about in his two letters to them (read 1 Thessalonians 4:11, 12; 1 Thessalonians 5:14; and 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 7, 11).

**Read 1 Corinthians 9:19–27. What basic missionary plan does Paul present in these verses? What danger may appear in this method? How can the two principles (important rules) of these verses be kept in proper balance?**

The gospel has the greatest influence when it covers the needs, hopes, and dreams of the listeners. But while the Holy Spirit can build bridges for the

gospel, this normally comes through much listening and the prayers of those witnessing. People are most open to the Seventh-day Adventist message in times of change too. Among the changes that open people to new ideas are economic (having to do with money) hardships, political rebellions (uprisings), war, marriage, divorce, dislocation (moving from one place to another), poor health, and death. The Thessalonians had experienced their share of hardships and changes in their lives. And this helped the gospel to spread among them.

But people who are baptized in times of trouble are also not stable (steady or strong) in their faith, at least at first. Many people backslide (fall away from the truth) in the first few months after conversion (change in beliefs and way of living). The letters to Thessalonica show that many church members were not fully settled in the truth several months after Paul's original visit.



**People are most open to the gospel in times of change.**

4. extreme—very serious or severe; very great in degree; very far from agreeing with the opinions of most people.

**What can we do to help members who are still adjusting to their new lives in Christ? Try to find someone new, or even a young person. What can you do to help this person become stable in the Lord? You will be amazed to find out that this kind of ministry (work done for God) will help make you much stronger too.**

### **WEDNESDAY—JULY 18**

#### **PAUL, THE “STREET PREACHER” (John 3:3–8)**

In the first-century Greco-(Greek) Roman world, there were many popular philosophers (thinkers) who tried to influence individuals and groups. Street preachers might do the same thing today.

These philosophers believed that people had the ability to change their lives (a form of conversion). Philosophers would use public speech and private conversation to cause change in their students. They tried to create doubts in their listeners about their ideas and practices. Then the listeners would become open to new ideas and change. The goal was to encourage independence and moral (righteous; holy) growth.

It was expected that such popular philosophers would earn the right to speak by first gaining moral freedom in their own inner lives. “Physician, heal thyself” was a popular saying in the world of Paul’s time.

These philosophers also knew that the message needed to be current

(up-to-date) so that it could meet different minds. They also knew that it was important to keep both the character (who someone is) of the teacher and the message honest.

So, there was much that was the same in the methods used by the popular teachers and Paul. For example, Paul himself traveled around and worked in the public places too (Acts 17:17, Acts 19:9, 10).

But there were two important differences between Paul’s method and that of these popular philosophers. First, Paul worked in the public places. But he also tried to form a lasting community. This requires some separation from “the world,” along with emotional (having deep feelings) bonds and deep loyalty to the group. Second, Paul taught that conversion was not an inner decision influenced by wise speech. Instead, he taught that conversion was an act of God that took place from outside a person (read Galatians 4:19; John 3:3–8; and Philippians 1:6). Paul’s teaching was more than just a philosophy. It was a preaching of the truth and an example of the powerful work of God in saving souls.

But there was another difference between Paul and the philosophers too. Unlike Paul, the popular philosophers had found an easy way to make a living. Many were false teachers, nothing more. Some would take advantage of their listeners sexually. True, there were some honest teachers among them. But many people did not take traveling speakers seriously.

Paul tried to avoid being mistaken as one of these popular philosophers

or false teachers by refusing to accept support from his listeners. Instead, he did hard, manual (done by hand) labor as a tentmaker to support himself. This, along with his sufferings, showed that he truly believed what he preached and that he was not doing it for profit. In many ways, Paul's life was the most powerful sermon he could preach.



Paul's life was the most powerful sermon he could preach.

## THURSDAY—JULY 19

### HOME CHURCHES (Romans 16:5)

**Read Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; and Philemon 1, 2. How are all these verses alike?**

In the Roman world there were two main kinds of homes. One was the *domus*. The *domus* was a large, single-family home built around a courtyard. Most wealthy families had them. Such a home could be a meeting place for 30 to 100 people. The

other kind of home was the *insula*. The *insula* had shops and workplaces on the ground floor facing the street and apartments on the floors above. This was the basic home of the working classes. One of these apartments or workplaces could normally hold only smaller gatherings.

The *domus*, and many of the *insula*, would house a large family with two or three generations of employees of the family business, visitors, and even slaves. If the head of household could be converted (turned to Christ), it could have a great influence on everyone else living there. Also whether the house was an *insula* or a *domus*, its meeting place could then serve as a church for the household as well as for many other people in the area.

The perfect location for a city house church would be near the city center. The shops and workplaces connected to the house would connect with artists, tradespeople, shoppers, and manual laborers looking for work. This was the type of place where much of Paul's missionary work may have been done.

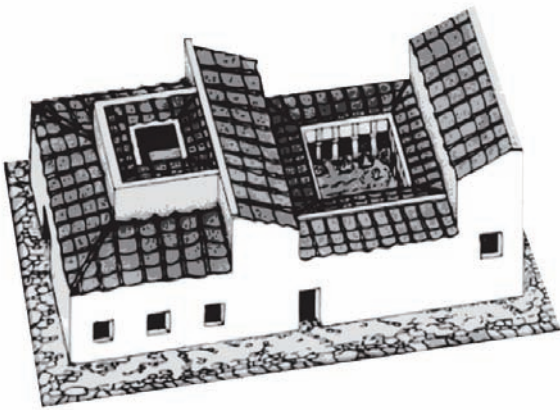
In some parts of the world, people still worship in home churches, often because that is all they have. Or, in some cases, they may not worship anywhere else, and so a home church is their only choice.

**Read Acts 18:1–3. How do these verses help us to understand how Paul worked?**

Paul was a Roman citizen and, at one time, a member of the highest

class of the Jews. Clearly, this meant he must have been from the upper classes. If true, working with his hands would have been a sacrifice (to give up something important) for Paul. By such labor, Paul chose to belong to the working classes and reach out to them (read 1 Corinthians 9:19–23).

**How well does your local church mix with the community? Are you involved in that community? Or is your church like a fort in which you separate yourself from the dangers of the world so much that you do not influence your community at all?**



The *domus* was a large, single-family home built around a courtyard.

### FRIDAY—JULY 20

**ADDITIONAL STUDY:** “God had directed the movements of nations and human affairs until the world was ripe for the coming of the Savior. . . .

“At this time the systems of heathen [not Christian] religion were losing their hold upon the people. Men

were tired of false teachings. They longed [wished] for a religion that could satisfy the heart.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 32.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① What do you think Ellen G. White meant when she wrote that the “Spirit of Inspiration” was given to Gentile teachers? How much is God at work in the world of ideas outside the Christian world? Can a person be saved if he or she has never heard the name of Jesus? If so, how?
- ② Would a private home or apartment be a good place for a church in today’s world? Are chosen church buildings always the best way to do church? Why, or why not?
- ③ How can your church learn to better adjust its outreach (acts of giving or helping) to the local community? Why must we always remember that what works in one area might not in another?

**SUMMARY:** The stories in the Bible about Paul’s missionary work are set in the world and under the control of Old Rome. As we find Paul wrestling with everyday issues, we can learn how to better use the principles and lessons that God placed in the Bible for us today. In 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Paul was guiding the Thessalonian Christians through challenging times.