

A Tale of Two Cities: Thessalonica & Berea

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The video version is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7FG7aU1RGk>

The scripture reading is Acts 16:35-17:15

Paul and Silas' time in Philippi bore fruit for the kingdom of God. Many people received salvation through Yeshua including the Philippi jailer and his household.

Acts 16:34 NKJV 34 Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household.

As a result of the incident leading up to and including their arrest, Paul and Silas had to leave Philippi. From Philippi, Paul, Silas and Timothy would travel to Thessalonica and Berea. Each of these cities had a sizeable Jewish population, but the reception of the gospel message would be quite different in these two cities.

Even though it was time for Paul and his companions to move on, they did not leave Philippi quietly or in secret. After the Philippi jailer took Paul and Silas into his home in response to the earthquake that opened all the doors of the jail, the leaders of Philippi hoped to keep the news quiet that they had beaten and jailed Roman citizens. They sent a message to the prison authorizing Paul and Silas' release admonishing them to leave the city quietly. Paul demanded that he and Silas be treated according to their status as Roman citizens.

Acts 16:37-38 NKJV 37 But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us openly, uncondemned Romans, and have thrown us into prison. And now do they put us out secretly? No indeed! Let them come themselves and get us out." 38 And the officers told these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Romans.

The officials did come to escort Paul and Silas out of the prison and politely asked them to leave the city. After a visit with Lydia and her household, Paul, Silas and Timothy continued their journey along the southern coast of Macedonia until they arrived at Thessalonica. Thessalonica was a large city of around two hundred thousand people. Unlike Philippi where there wasn't a Jewish synagogue, Thessalonica had a synagogue and a sizeable Jewish population.

Acts 17:1 NKJV 1 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.

Paul followed his usual pattern of seeking out the Jewish population of a city first. In Philippi, he sought out the Jewish population by the river where they met for prayer. In Thessalonica, he went to the synagogue. As a visiting rabbi, Paul was invited to speak to the congregation and present his message.

Acts 17:2-4 NKJV 2 Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ." 4 And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas.

Over three consecutive Sabbaths, Paul demonstrated from the scriptures that the Messiah would have to suffer first and then rise from the dead. Paul undoubtedly used the model of Abraham's willing sacrifice of Isaac to demonstrate that the promised seed of Abraham must first die and then be resurrected from the

dead. First Fruits of Zion in Torah Club Volume 2: Shadows of the Messiah relates that according to a Talmudic story, Isaac was actually sacrificed, burned on the altar, and resurrected from the ashes.¹ Perhaps Paul referred to this literal or symbolic understanding of the sacrifice of Isaac. Surely, Paul would have referred to Isaiah's words about the suffering servant.

Isaiah 53:10-12 NKJV 10 Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, And the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in His hand. 11 He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, For He shall bear their iniquities. 12 Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great, And He shall divide the spoil with the strong, Because He poured out His soul unto death, And He was numbered with the transgressors, And He bore the sin of many, And made intercession for the transgressors.

Paul most likely referred to the Psalms of David as he did in his arguments at Antioch in Pisidia.

Acts 13:33-35 NKJV 33 "God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm: 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.' 34 "And that He raised Him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, He has spoken thus: 'I will give you the sure mercies of David.' 35 "Therefore He also says in another Psalm: 'You will not allow Your Holy One to see corruption.'

Paul described Yeshua's death and resurrection concluding with the declaration that Yeshua was the Messiah spoken of by Moses, the writings and the prophets. The reception of the gospel was lukewarm among the Jews. Luke tells us that some of the Jews were persuaded. However, the gospel was received with enthusiasm among the Gentiles. Luke tells us that thousands of Gentiles believed! This situation is very much like the situation in Antioch in Pisidia where the number of Gentiles flocking to the Jewish synagogue cause outrage and jealousy.

Acts 13:45 NKJV 45 But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul.

In Thessalonica, Paul and his companions stayed with a Jewish believer named Jason. While there, they balanced their time teaching the new believers with working for their living. Paul reminded the Thessalonian believers of their conduct in a letter he would later write to them from Corinth.

2 Thessalonians 3:7-8 NKJV 7 For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly among you; 8 nor did we eat anyone's bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you,

Paul and Silas' time in Thessalonica was rewarding as they watched the new believers grow. At the same time, it was challenging as they guarded against the jealousy of the Jews who didn't believe Paul's message. Paul would remind the Thessalonians of the blessings and challenges of their time with them in another letter that he wrote to them from Corinth.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-4 NKJV 1 For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain. 2 But even after we had suffered before and were spitefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in much conflict. 3 For our exhortation did not come from error or uncleanness, nor was it in deceit. 4 But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts.

Paul, Silas and Timothy did not let the hostility of the Jewish non-believers keep them from proclaiming the gospel and mentoring the believers. Everything they did was out in the open and above board. As they ministered, they developed a great fondness for the Thessalonian believers.

1 Thessalonians 2:7-9 NKJV 7 But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children. 8 So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. 9 For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God.

Their success was such that the Thessalonian believers took the gospel message everywhere they went. In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul mentioned the good report that Timothy brought to him of them sharing the gospel.

1 Thessalonians 1:5-8 NKJV 5 For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake. 6 And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. 8 For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything.

Because of the success of the gospel among the Gentiles of Thessalonica, the unbelieving Jews persecuted Paul and his companions. They stirred up the secular authorities and accused Paul and the other believers of undermining the rule of Caesar.

Acts 17:5-7 NKJV 5 But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. 6 But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too. 7 "Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king--Jesus."

Paul was once again suffering for the offense of the gospel that salvation was granted to the Gentiles as well as the Jews and that the Gentiles did not need to convert to Judaism to be saved. Paul's accusers used the argument that the Pharisees used against Yeshua; they asserted that Paul was teaching that there was another king other than Caesar. Although true in the broader sense, Yeshua's kingdom was not, and is not yet, of this world. The accusations naturally troubled those in authority. Jason and the other believers who were dragged before the magistrates were required to pay a security or bond before they were released.

Acts 17:8-9 NKJV 8 And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things. 9 So when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.

This incident brought the Gentile believers under the scrutiny of the Roman officials and other leaders of the city. Their beliefs and practices were radically different than mainstream Roman society. This brought them, like Paul, under persecution for the offense of the gospel. In his letter, Paul reassures them that this persecution was not unprecedented.

1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 NKJV 14 For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, 15 who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted

us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, 16 forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost.

Immediately after the confrontation with the Jewish unbelievers, Paul and his companions slipped out of Thessalonica during the night.

Acts 17:10 NKJV 10 Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews.

Berea was an inland city fifty miles to the southwest of Thessalonica. It was a much smaller city although it, like Thessalonica, had a Jewish synagogue. Paul did not let the fact that they had to flee Thessalonica stop him from preaching the gospel of salvation. Upon their arrival in the city, they immediately went to the synagogue.

While the reception of the gospel among the Jews of Thessalonica was lukewarm, it was received with openness at Berea.

Acts 17:11 NKJV 11 These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.

The Bereans examined what Paul told them and went to the scriptures themselves to see if what Paul said was true. As a result of their own study of the scriptures, they believed that Yeshua was the long-awaited Messiah.

Acts 17:12 MKJV 12 Therefore many of them believed, and quite a few of honorable Greek women and men.

These Jews received the gospel message with gladness as did many of the Gentiles. This community was balanced with both Jewish and Gentile believers! This community is what Paul envisioned for all believers. He will later write to the Ephesians admonishing them to walk in unity of spirit.

Ephesians 4:1-3 MKJV 1 I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beseech you that you walk worthy of the calling with which you are called, 2 with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love, 3 endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Paul will, also, instruct Timothy to know the scriptures in order to be prepared for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 MKJV 16 All Scripture is God-breathed, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be perfected, thoroughly furnished to every good work.

At this time, the scriptures were only those of Torah, prophets, and writings. The only New Testament book that had been written at this time was Paul's letter to the Galatians. Although this letter, as well as other letters that would be written by the apostles, the gospel accounts and Luke's account of the acts of the apostles would be treasured by the early congregations of believers, it would not be until the third century that they would be accepted as part of the divinely inspired word of God.

When the unbelieving Jews in Thessalonica heard about the spread of the gospel message in Berea, they traveled to Berea and stirred up trouble for Paul and the new believers like they had done at Thessalonica.

Acts 17:13-15 MKJV 13 But when the Jews from Thessalonica knew that the Word of God was preached by Paul at Berea, they came there also and stirred up the people. 14 And then immediately

the brothers sent Paul away to go towards the sea, but both Silas and Timothy stayed there. 15 And those conducting Paul brought him to Athens. And receiving a command to Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed, they departed.

Paul's time in both Thessalonica and Berea resulted in new congregations of believers in both cities. In Thessalonica, this group of believers was rejected by many of the Jews who deliberately caused trouble for the new believers. They were jealous that this Yeshua, whom Paul taught was the Jewish Messiah, also brought salvation to the Gentiles. In contrast, the Bereans, after studying God's word joyously accepted Yeshua as their Messiah and that He brought salvation to the Gentiles as well. Wherever the gospel message goes, it is received according to the hearts of the people. There will always be those who accept the message with joy. And there will always be those who reject it vehemently persecuting those who receive and believe.

Study Questions:

1. Paul asserted his right as a Roman citizen in Philippi. Where else does Paul assert his right as a Roman citizen. What does this tell us about Paul? What does asserting this right in Philippi gain Paul?
2. What is the motivation of those who persecute Paul? Do those who later persecute the Thessalonians have the same motive? (1 Thes. 2:14-16)
3. Paul states that the scriptures reveal that Messiah must suffer and be resurrected from the dead in Acts 17:3. How does this tie in with Isaac and the understanding we learned from Galatians that it is through the promise to Abraham that we have salvation?
4. It seems that someone was teaching the Thessalonians that there is no resurrection of the dead. How does Paul correct that error in his first letter to the Thessalonians?
5. In what way does Paul use the Bereans as an example to Timothy and, by extension, to us?
6. What new insight did you gain from this teaching? How do you respond to this new insight? How will you realign your life based on this new understanding?

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ⁱ Torah Club Volume 2: Shadows of Messiah in the Torah. First Fruits of Zion. Page 60.