

Allegiance – FMC – Oct. 19, 2008 – 1 Thess. 1:1-10

Let's take a journey back through time. [excavations, Thessalonica]

In the background of this photo you can see the modern Greek city of Salonika.

The modern city is built right on top of the ancient city, which goes by a name more familiar to us—Thessalonica.

[excavations] Here, in the foreground is the ancient agora, the marketplace of Thessalonica. Again, you can see the modern city in the background.

Today, Salonika is the 2nd-largest city in Greece. In the days of the Apostle Paul, Thessalonica may have been #1. [drawing, old city]

Thessalonica was at a strategic location; it was at the crossroads of East and West, North and South. [add map]

It was one of the world's major seaports, a prosperous, thriving, metropolis, a center of business, an administrative capital for Rome, a place full of both Greek and Roman culture.

The city was founded about 350 years before the time of Paul by a Greek named Cassander.

Cassander married the half-sister of Alexander the Great. Her name was Thessalonica. Cassander founded the city we're speaking of today, and he named the city after his wife.

Thessalonica was a place where many gods were worshipped. Because it was such a large city with a diverse population, its citizens were part of a multitude of cults, and worshipped a multitude of gods and deities.

As new people entered the city, their gods were added to the gods that were already present.

It was not great thing to simply add another god to the list of those that appealed to their needs.

When it came to gods, the motto of the Thessalonians was this: The more, the merrier!

In the midst of all that religious diversity, there was one form of worship, however, that was required of all.

Thessalonica was part of the Roman Empire, and in the empire, the emperor was not only to be respected and obeyed, but also worshipped.

In American culture today, a certain level of respect is expected of all citizens toward our president and toward our national symbols. We also know something of civil religion and social pressures to conform and to give unqualified allegiance to country.

Multiply our experience by a factor of 10; add the fact that the emperor claimed to be divine, that all citizens were expected to demonstrate loyalty to the emperor by making religious sacrifice, and that the pledge of allegiance of all Roman citizens was to say, "Caesar is Lord."

Thessalonica was VERY loyal to Rome, and though all kinds of gods were tolerated and accepted, the one worship that was required was worship of emperor.

Imagine yourself a Gentile in ancient Thessalonica. There were some Jews in the city; they had their synagogues. But you are among the vast majority, the non-Jews, the Gentiles.

Your family worships a variety of gods; your parents, their parents, and their parents back for many generations have a variety of gods that have been worshipped, sacrificed to, and venerated.

You are also loyal to Rome.

You appreciate the Roman peace, the Roman legal system, and the booming economy from which you have benefited—all from the leadership of the emperor, to whom your family also makes sacrifice in worship, and to whom your family pledges its absolute loyalty and allegiance.

And then, in about 50 A.D. a stranger comes to town.
You take little notice of him at first, because he's a Jew.

He's a Jewish preacher, and this traveler goes first to the Jewish synagogue to preach.

He tells them about a fellow named Jesus, another Jew from the land of Israel.

He says that Jesus is the Jewish promised Messiah, that he died, and that he rose again, as the Jewish Scriptures predicted.

Only a few Jews believed the guy, the guy named Paul, and his friend Silas.

Most of the Jews thought they were nuts, that they were dangerous, and they formed a mob, started a riot, and dragged them before some city officials claiming:

"These guys are dangerous; kick them out of town!"

Now, it's important that we hear their specific charge against Paul and Silas.

What REALLY got them worked up was the fact that they dared to call this Jesus fellow a "king."

That was treasonous.

In the Roman Empire, there was only one king: Caesar.

"These guys doesn't love their country," they said.

"These guys don't pray to the emperor," they said.

"These guys follow ANOTHER king," they said.

A Jewish fellow named Jason had accepted the preaching of Paul, and he as well as a few others were all accused of not showing allegiance to the emperor.

The city officials saw this as an opportunity to make a little money, so they required the Jews to post a bond, and then let them go.

Paul and Silas hit the road—after only 3 weeks in Thessalonica.

And now, the rest of the story.

I said that I wanted you to imagine that you were a Gentile in Thessalonica,
a regular, emperor-worshipping, Gentile,
a person who worships the many gods your family has always
worshipped.

Somehow, during those 3 short weeks that Paul was in Thessalonica,
you and a group of your friends started listening to this traveling
Jewish preacher.

You see, he not only preached in the synagogues, where you, as a Gentile
could not go.

He also preached on the streets, under the trees,
in the shops—to Gentiles.

You, a Gentile who worshipped many gods, including the emperor,
were drawn to this traveling Jewish preacher and to his
message about Jesus.

After only a few weeks of hearing this guy,
and you believed what he said about Jesus.

You believed that Jesus was sent from God.

You believe that Jesus died and rose again.

And most of all, you believed that Jesus was a king, your king,
the only king, the only one who deserves to be worshipped.

And so you threw away your idols.

You stopped worshipping all your other gods.

And most of all, you stopped saying “Caesar is Lord.”

You stopped saying the Roman pledge of allegiance.

3 weeks. That’s how long Paul was in Thessalonica.

3 weeks of preaching by a foreigner you had never heard of.

3 weeks of preaching by a Jewish fellow who is asking you to believe
in a man you’ve never laid eyes on—Jesus.

Not only do you believe, but many of your Gentile friends join you in
that belief.

And when Paul and Silas got kicked out of town,
you who believed his message kept meeting in one another's homes,
to encourage each other.

You became the church at Thessalonica.

Paul left Thessalonica after 3 weeks and went south to Corinth.
And he wondered, of course,
if those new converts back in Thessalonica were going to
be able to stick to their new beliefs.
He wondered if they would be able to resist the pressure from
their neighbors, from the authorities,
to worship the national gods, to worship the emperor.

So Paul sent Timothy back from Corinth to Thessalonica to see how they
were doing.

When he got Timothy's very positive report,
he was glad—he was thankful—he was relieved.
So he immediately wrote them a letter—
the letter we know as First Thessalonians.

Now, they did have some problems.

They did have some misunderstandings, which is evident from the
rest of the letter.

But how could you blame them: 3 weeks of preaching from a traveling
preacher—that's all they knew.

Of course, they needed further instruction.

But this new church was clear on one thing: Jesus was Lord.

And for that he commends them.

We know that most of the church members at Thessalonica were of Gentile
background, for in verse 9 of Paul's first letter back to these folks,
a letter he wrote from Corinth, on down the road,
he says, "They tell us how you turned to God from idols."

Jews would never have worshipped idols,
so Paul is clearly revealing that the Thessalonian church was mostly
made up of Gentiles,
whose background was idol worship and emperor worship.

Twice, the first few verses of his letter, Paul makes a point of referring to Jesus as “Lord.”

To us, reading this letter 2,000 years later,
it sounds like standard religious language,
and we pass over the word “Lord” rather quickly.

Not so the Thessalonians.

“Lord” was a loaded word.

To call Jesus “Lord” was to claim that Caesar is NOT Lord.

It was treason.

It was punishable by death.

It was to set you apart from all your neighbors and friends,
who still worshipped lots of gods, including the emperor.

It is one of the great miracles of the early church that after 3 weeks of preaching by Paul,
this fledgling church stood absolutely firm in its commitment to Jesus as Lord—as the ONLY “Lord.”

Paul recognizes that calling Jesus “Lord” is costly for them.

It makes their neighbors make fun of them, look down on them,
discriminate against them, get angry at them.

Paul says to them: “You became imitators of us and of the Lord.”

He’s referring to the fact that Jesus suffered and was crucified,
that he and Silas suffered in Thessalonica for their faith,
and that this new little church is also suffering.

Imitation here isn’t something they were trying to do;

it was the natural result of following Jesus as king, which Paul also did.

“You’re a model,” says Paul.

“ALL the churches in Macedonia and Achaia know of your example.
Your bravery in publicly claiming Jesus as Lord is inspiring
other believers all over the country,” says Paul.

After 3 weeks of preaching, with no New Testament in their hands,
these folks are living out the heart of the Gospel:
that Jesus is Lord, and that there is none other.

3 weeks.

Most of us have had decades of preaching, decades of teaching,
training and Bible reading and praying in our homes,
lots of Bibles in lots of translations from the time we've been
children.

Are we as clear as the Thessalonians about the fact that Jesus—
ONLY Jesus—is Lord—and that there is none other?

Have we rejected all other idols?
Have we dared to risk the derision and discrimination and anger of our
neighbors over our insistence that we have only one allegiance—
to Jesus Christ?

Have we the courage to “turn the world upside down” with our loyalty
to King Jesus as they did?

Those are the words the authorities in Thessalonica used about Paul
and Silas and this new little church:
“They’re turning the world upside down,” was their accusation.
You find that in Acts 17:6.

The issue was loyalty.
The issue was allegiance.

These people were a threat to the system because they followed a
different king.

These people provoked the fury of the authorities because they
recognized a higher authority.

These people would pray for the emperor but they would not obey him.
The emperor gets respect,
but unquestioning obedience is reserved only for God.

Caesar has power, but Jesus is Lord.

If we make anything or anyone Lord rather than Jesus,
we are also idolaters.

We would never set up little wooden or metal idols to worship,
but we are as prone to idolatry as were the Gentiles in Thessalonica
before Paul showed up.

Money is not our Lord.

The affirmation of our neighbors is not our Lord.

The president of the United States is not our Lord.

Our favorite possession is not our Lord.

Tradition is not our Lord.

Our country is not our Lord.

The expectations and prejudices and opinions of others
is not our Lord.

The Thessalonian church changed from one lord to another Lord
in three weeks.

They changed from pledging allegiance from one king to another.
They were converted—wholly and completely.

We, who have heard about King Jesus for a lot longer than 3 weeks,
sometimes forget what a radical change it is to be converted from
the worship of other gods to the one God,
to be changed from the lordship of possessions or reputation
to the Lordship of Christ,
to change allegiance from the kings of this earth to King Jesus.

But to that conversion we are also called.

King Jesus asks us, as he asked the Thessalonians,
to allow him—him only—to be on the throne of our hearts and lives.

To do so will cost us—as it did them.

Dual allegiance will not work;

you can't serve both God and something else unconditionally.

You can't have two masters whom you obey without question.

One king.

One allegiance.

That is the call of Jesus.

Will YOU pledge that allegiance?