

The Gospel Comes to Thessalonica



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Acts 16:9–40; 17:1–4, 12; Jer. 23:1–6; Isa. 9:1–7; Isaiah 53; Rom. 1:16.

Memory Text: “And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe” (1 Thessalonians 2:13, NIV).

Key Thought: Our assurance of God's promises must be based on our confidence in His Holy Scriptures.

The young pastor sat outside with a young woman who had just been baptized. Much to his surprise, she said, “I need to be baptized again.”

When the pastor asked why, she responded, “There are things that I didn't tell the senior pastor about my past.”

Thus began a long conversation about forgiveness in Christ, which she hungrily consumed. When the pastor finished praying with her, a huge downpour suddenly drenched them both. Eyes shining, the young woman said, “I'm being baptized again!”

A gracious God often provides living tokens, such as this unexpected rain, to assure believers that they are right with Him. But our confidence in God will be even more solidly grounded when it is based on the clear teaching of His Word. In this lesson we'll see that the fulfillment of prophecy provided solid assurance to the new believers in Thessalonica.

*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 7.

The Preachers Pay a Price

Read Acts 16:9–40. According to the passage, why did the Philippians react so negatively to the gospel? What important principle can we find in their reaction that we always need to be wary of ourselves? In what other ways can this principle be made manifest, even in the lives of professed Christians?

The gospel is the good news of God’s mighty actions in Christ that lead to forgiveness, acceptance, and transformation (*Rom. 1:16, 17*). Through sin, the whole world was condemned; through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the whole world was given a new opportunity to have the eternal life that God originally wanted for all humanity. God’s mighty work was done for us while we were still sinners (*Rom. 5:8*). This work of redemption was accomplished outside of us, by Jesus, and we can add nothing to it—nothing. Yet, the gospel becomes real in our lives only when we accept, not only its condemnation of our sins but God’s forgiveness of those sins through Jesus.

Being that the gospel is such good news and is free, why would anyone resist or fight against it? The answer is simple: accepting the gospel calls us to set aside confidence in self and in worldly things such as money, power, and sexual attractiveness. Money, sex, and power are good things when submitted to the will and ways of God. But when people cling to these trivial matters that substitute for the assurance of the gospel, the gospel and those who proclaim it become a threat.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:1, 2. Paul and Silas entered Thessalonica in pain, their bodies bearing the cuts and bruises they had received from their heavy beating and confinement in Philippi (*Acts 16:22–24*). But tokens of the mighty power of God (*Acts 16:26, 30, 36*) had encouraged their hearts. They boldly entered the synagogue at Thessalonica, in spite of their pain, and spoke again of the Messiah, who had changed their lives and sent them on a mission to preach the good news in places where it had not been heard before.

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

Paul's Preaching Strategy

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

Although 1 Thessalonians was among Paul's earliest letters, both his theology and missionary strategy were well developed by the time he arrived in Thessalonica.

The first step in Paul's missionary strategy was to attend the local synagogue on the Sabbath. This was natural because the Sabbath was a good time to reach Jews in large numbers. However, more than just a missionary strategy was at work here. Paul would have taken time for prayer and worship on the Sabbath even if no Jews or no synagogue was available (*see Acts 16:13*).

It was not uncommon in those days for Jews to invite synagogue visitors to speak, especially if they had lived in Jerusalem, as Paul and Silas had. The congregation 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 Scriptures. So, Paul's strategy was a natural fit with the synagogue environment.

The second step in Paul's strategy was to preach directly from their common Scriptures, the Old Testament. He also began with a topic of great interest to the Jews of the time, the Messiah ("the Christ" is the Greek equivalent of "the Messiah" in the Hebrew; *see Acts 17:3*). Using texts from the Old Testament, Paul demonstrated that the Messiah would first have to suffer before He would obtain the glory with which the Jews were familiar. In other words, the popular, glorious version of the Messiah's mission was only part of the picture. When the Messiah would first appear, He would be a suffering servant rather than a royal conqueror.

Third, having established a fresh picture of the Messiah in their minds, Paul went on to tell the story of Jesus. He explained how Jesus' life conformed to the pattern of the Bible prophecy that he had just shared with them. No doubt he added stories about his own previous doubts and opposition and also spoke of the convincing power of his personal encounter with the exalted Christ. According to Luke (*Luke 24:25–27, 44–46*), Paul's preaching strategy in Thessalonica followed the same pattern that Jesus had used with His disciples after the resurrection.

Notice that Paul sought to reach people where they were, using that with which they were familiar. Why is this strategy so important? Think about those whom you want to reach. How can you learn to start where they are and not where you are?

Two Views of the Messiah

Since ancient times, readers of the Old Testament have noticed a variety of perspectives in the prophecies pointing toward the Messiah. Most Jews and early Christians identified two major strands in the Messianic prophecies. On the one hand, there were texts that pointed toward a royal Messiah: a conquering king who would bring justice to the people and extend Israel's rule to the ends of the earth. On the other hand, there were texts that suggested the Messiah would be a Suffering Servant, humiliated and rejected. The mistake that many made was in not understanding that all these texts were referring to the same person—to different aspects of His work at different times.

Read Jeremiah 23:1–6, Isaiah 9:1–7, 53:1–6, Zechariah 9:9. List the characteristics of the future deliverer that you find in these texts. What kind of “conflicting” images appear here?

These texts were puzzling in advance of the Messiah's coming. On the one hand, the royal messianic texts usually contained no hint of suffering or humiliation. On the other hand, the Suffering Servant texts usually described the Messiah as having little power or worldly authority. One way that the Jews of Jesus' day resolved this problem was to see the Suffering Servant as a symbol of the whole nation and its sufferings in the course of exile and occupation. By removing these texts from the messianic equation, many Jews expected the royal or conquering Messiah. This King, like David, would throw off the occupiers and restore Israel's place among the nations.

Of course, a major problem that results from removing the Suffering Servant texts from the equation is that there are, indeed, significant Old Testament texts that blend the two major characteristics of the Messiah. They describe the same person. What is less clear, at first glance, is whether those characteristics occur 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 texts, and they together explored their significance.

In ancient times, the Jews were confused about the first coming of the Messiah. Today, we find much confusion about the Second Coming as well. What should this tell us about the importance of truly seeking to understand Bible truth? Why can false doctrine be so problematic?

Suffering Before Glory

Jesus, like Paul, studied the Old Testament and drew the conclusion 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* translates the same word as *Acts 17:3 (NIV)*, where Paul says the Messiah “had to suffer.” For Jesus and Paul, the priority of suffering before glory was written into the prophecies long before they were to have occurred. The question is, then, on what Old Testament basis did they come to this conclusion?

They likely would have noticed that the most significant figures in the Old Testament had a prolonged period of suffering before they entered into the glory period of their lives. Joseph spent some thirteen years in prison before ascending to the role of prime minister of Egypt. Moses spent 40 years chasing sheep through the desert before taking up his role as the powerful leader of the Exodus. David spent many years as a fugitive, some of that time in foreign lands, before being elevated to kingship. Daniel was a prisoner of war, and was even condemned to death, before his elevation to the position of prime minister of Babylon. In the Old Testament stories of these servants of God, there are foreshadowings of the Messiah, who would also suffer and be humiliated before being elevated to His full royal role.

The capstone of this New Testament conviction is found in the most widely quoted Old Testament text in the New Testament: *Isaiah 53*. The Suffering Servant of *Isaiah* was despised, rejected, and sorrowful (*Isa. 53:2–4*). Like a sanctuary lamb, He was slaughtered on account of our sins (*Isa. 53:5–7*), according to the will of the Lord (*Isa. 53:8–10*). But “after the suffering of his soul” (*Isa. 53:11, NIV*), He would justify many and receive a powerful inheritance (*Isa. 53:12*).

For the writers of the New Testament, *Isaiah 53* was the key to the Messiah’s role. Paul would certainly have preached this text in Thessalonica. According to *Isaiah 53*, the Messiah would not appear kingly or powerful at the time of His first appearance. In fact, He would be rejected by many of His own people. But that rejection would be the prelude to the glorious Messiah of Jewish expectation. With this in mind, Paul was able to show that the Jesus he had come to know was, in fact, the Messiah whom the Old Testament had foretold.

Prayerfully read through *Isaiah 53*, realizing that it’s talking about what the Lord, our Creator, went through just so that you, personally, can have eternal life. In light of what this amazing truth tells us about the character of God, why should Christ be first and foremost in our lives?

A Church Is Born

According to Acts 17:1–4, 12, what classes of people made up the core of the Thessalonian church plant?

A part of Paul’s missionary strategy was “to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (*Rom. 1:16, ESV*). During Paul’s ministry, the Jews regularly received the first opportunity to hear and accept the gospel. And the fact is that, according to the Bible, many Jews in Paul’s time did accept Jesus as the Messiah. Later, as the church started to apostatize and reject the law, especially the Sabbath, it became harder and harder for Jews to accept Jesus as the Messiah because, after all, what Messiah would nullify the law, especially the Sabbath?

As the texts show, some of the Jews in Thessalonica were persuaded by Paul’s exposition of messianic texts in relation to the story of Jesus. One of these, Aristarchus, was later a coworker with Paul and even, at one point, a fellow prisoner (*see Col. 4:10, 11; Acts 20:4*). Another, Jason, was apparently wealthy enough to house the church at his home after they were no longer welcome in the synagogue, and he also provided at least a portion of the bond needed to prevent Paul’s arrest (*see Acts 17:4–9*).

The “God-fearing Greeks” (*Acts 17:4, NIV*) are usually thought to be Gentiles who became enamored with Judaism and attended the synagogue but did not convert. This was a widespread phenomenon in Paul’s day. These Gentiles became a natural bridge for Paul to reach those Gentiles who had no knowledge at all of Judaism or the Old Testament.

The Jewish, and relatively wealthy, character of the original church plant in Thessalonica is emphasized in Acts 17 (for example, verse 12), in which “prominent” Greeks also became believers. It is clear, however, that by the time 1 Thessalonians was written, the church to which Paul was writing was largely made up of Gentiles (*1 Thess. 1:9*) from the laboring classes (*1 Thess. 4:11*).

What we can see here is the universal character of the gospel—that it is for all people, all classes, all races; rich or poor, Greek or Jew, it doesn’t matter—Christ’s death was for the whole world. That is why our message, as Seventh-day Adventists, is for the whole world (*Rev. 14:6*)—without any exceptions. How important it is that we keep that mandate always before us. How important it is that we not become insular, self-absorbed, and more interested in sustaining what we have than in reaching out beyond the comfortable boundaries that we, perhaps even subconsciously, have set for ourselves.

Further Study: “From Paul’s day to the present time, God by His Holy Spirit has been calling after the Jew as well as the Gentile. ‘There is no respect of persons with God,’ declared Paul. The apostle regarded himself as ‘debtor both to the Greeks, and to the barbarians,’ as well as to the Jews; but he never lost sight of the decided advantages possessed by the Jews over others, ‘chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God.’ ‘The gospel,’ he declared, ‘is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.’ ” —Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 380.

“In preaching to the Thessalonians, Paul appealed to the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. . . . By the inspired testimony of Moses and the prophets he clearly proved the identity of Jesus of Nazareth with the Messiah and showed that from the days of Adam it was the voice of Christ which had been speaking through patriarchs and prophets.”—Pages 221, 222. (See the extensive collection of Old Testament texts that follows on pages 222–229.)

“In the closing proclamation of the gospel, when special work is to be done for classes of people hitherto neglected, God expects His messengers to take particular interest in the Jewish people whom they find in all parts of the earth. . . . As they see the Christ of the gospel dispensation portrayed in the pages of the Old Testament Scriptures, and perceive how clearly the New Testament explains the Old, their slumbering faculties will be aroused, and they will recognize Christ as the Saviour of the world. Many will by faith receive Christ as their Redeemer.”—Page 381.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Paul approached the Jews of his day on the basis of the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. To what degree is such an approach useful today with Jews, especially with secular Jews who might not even be familiar with the Old Testament prophecies? What other kinds of approaches should be considered today for secular Jews, as well as for any groups of unreached people?
- ❷ How can the prophecies of the Bible be made to connect more effectively with your friends and neighbors? What approaches should you use with people who don’t believe in the authority of the Bible? For instance, how could Daniel 2 help someone from a secular or nonbiblical perspective start to trust the Bible as the Word of God?

Summary: A number of 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 be grounded in the Bible and the truths that it teaches, not only for ourselves but in order to be the most effective witnesses possible.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Acts 17:1–4*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize that Christ’s suffering and death were a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

Feel: Assured that his or her faith is not misplaced but is rooted in God’s ultimate plan to save the world.

Do: Share with others the certainty of his or her faith.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Slain From the Foundation of the World

A Jesus is described in Revelation 13:8 as the “Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (*NKJV*). What does this indicate about the nature and origin of God’s plan to redeem the world?

B Why was it necessary for Christ to suffer and die in order for the world to be restored? Why could God not simply have overlooked Adam’s and Eve’s sin?

C The apostle Paul refers to Christ as “our Passover lamb” (*1 Cor. 5:7, NIV*). How is the Passover lamb a type of Christ?

II. Feel: Saved by Another

A If you had been the oldest son in a Jewish family in Egypt during the Passover, what kind of emotions do you think you would have experienced following the event?

III. Do: Compelled to Share

A How has your gratitude for God’s free gift of salvation compelled you to live your life for Him?

► **Summary:** Christ’s suffering and death was ultimately not a miscarriage of justice but the fulfillment of God’s plan to redeem the world. This realization can give us confidence in God’s Word and His love for us as it did for the new believers in Thessalonica.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Christ’s suffering and death was not ultimately a miscarriage of justice but part of God’s divine plan to deal with sin and restore sinners into unbroken fellowship with Him.

Just for Teachers: This week we explore why Scripture says it was “necessary” for the Messiah to suffer and die in order to fulfill God’s plan to redeem the world.

On August 5, 2010, disaster struck a precious-metals mine in Chile when 700,000 tons of rock collapsed into the mine’s main shaft, trapping 33 miners more than a half mile below ground. Rescue teams had nearly given up hope of finding the men alive, but finally, after 17 days of drilling small holes into different areas of the mine, one drill came back to the surface with a note attached to it: “The 33 of us in the shelter are well.” Miraculously the miners had survived, though they had nearly starved to death. Plans were immediately set in place to drill an escape tunnel.

Although many were frustrated that the escape tunnel took more than two months to drill, others were concerned that the size of the tunnel, which stretched for more than two thousand two hundred feet through solid rock, was too small.

Why did the tunnel have to be so small? While the engineers had detailed explanations, the simple answer was that it was “necessary” in order for the rescue to be successful. A larger escape tunnel (in an overexploited mine that was more than a century old) was just far too dangerous.

Consider This: The plight of the Chilean miners parallels our need of divine rescue. How much of the details about the “necessity” of God’s rescue plan do we need to understand?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. The Necessity of Christ’s Suffering and Death (*Review Acts 17:1–4 with the class.*)

According to Luke, a central component of Paul’s gospel presentation to

the Thessalonians was the fact that Christ's suffering and death was not a tragic mistake but a divine "necessity." The Greek word translated as "necessary" (*dei*) is a significant word for Luke. It occurs 18 times in his gospel and 22 more times in Acts. Luke uses this word to indicate that the events in Jesus' life were not merely the result of chance but were part of a divine plan revealed in Scripture to redeem the human race.

The first time that Luke uses this word in his gospel occurs when Joseph and Mary lose sight of the 12-year-old Jesus in Jerusalem (*Luke 2:41–51*). When they find Him at last in the temple, Jesus says it should have been no surprise that He was there because it was "necessary" for Him to be "in His Father's house." This same basic message occurs multiple times in Luke as Jesus talks about various aspects of His life. Jesus speaks about the divine necessity of His preaching the gospel (*Luke 4:43*), of His healing of a crippled woman on the Sabbath (*13:16*), of His meal at the house of Zacchaeus, and, most important and most frequent, the necessity of His suffering, rejection, and ultimate death in Jerusalem (*13:33; 17:25; 22:37; 24:7, 26*).

While it is easy to see the "necessity" behind some of these events, such as the healing of someone in order to demonstrate God's love, why was it "necessary" that Jesus also suffer and die as part of God's plan to save the world? Couldn't God just have overlooked sin or given us a second chance that didn't demand His death?

Although overlooking a sin might sound like an easy thing to do, God could not do it without compromising His justice and holiness. Sin is no trivial problem. It is entirely opposite of God's character. Sin is evil; it causes suffering and brings death. To dismiss sin would have been the equivalent of justifying its existence. That is something God could not do. His very nature required that He deal with sin. Yet, as a loving God, He also wanted to offer mercy to sinners.

In order to be both just in dealing with sin and to be merciful in dealing with sinners, God chose to take the punishment and penalty of our sins upon Himself. He did this by sending Jesus to be our Substitute. Jesus died the death that we deserve so that we might have the life that He deserved. This is the very thing the apostle Paul explains in Romans 3:26, where he says that Jesus' death made it possible for God to be both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (*NKJV*).

Consider This: The Bible repeatedly describes God as being both a just God in dealing with sin and a loving God in dealing with sinners. What distorted pictures would emerge if we overemphasized, or only emphasized, one of these attributes?

II. The “Foolishness” of the Cross *(Review Roman 1:16 with the class.)*

While early Christians saw Christ’s suffering and death as a “necessary” part of God’s plan to redeem the world, Jews and Gentiles did not. The idea that the long-awaited Messiah was supposed to be crucified seemed ludicrous to Jews. The Messiah was supposed to defeat Israel’s enemies—not be crucified by them. The Romans also thought that Christians were deluded in their following of Jesus. Who would worship someone who was, at least in the mind of a Roman, a crucified criminal? From the world’s perspective, the Cross was an object of shame and defeat, not something to be venerated.

In a piece of ancient graffiti discovered in Rome that dates back to about the time of Paul, we can get a glimpse of the type of razzing and contempt that Christians must have experienced as a result of their faith. Interestingly enough, this discovery, which is known as the *Alexamenos graffito*, also appears to be the earliest known drawing of the crucifixion of Jesus. It depicts a crucifixion scene where the individual on the cross has the head of a donkey but the body of a man. Beside the cross a young man can be seen kneeling in worship. Scratched below the cross is the statement: “Alexander worships [his] god.” The point is obvious—Christians were seen as stupid for believing in Jesus. In this type of environment, it is no wonder that when writing to the Romans Paul had to remind them that the gospel of the crucified and raised Jesus was not something to be “ashamed” of but something to boast in (*Rom. 1:16*). For it is through the “foolishness” (*1 Cor. 1:18*) of the Cross that Christ conquered the power of sin and death.

Consider This: The message of the cross of Jesus continues to be ridiculed by unbelievers today. What can we do to encourage those within the church to not become “ashamed” of the Cross but to glory in it?

► **STEP 3**—Apply

Just for Teachers: Encourage your students to use these questions as a way to think about the necessity of Christ’s death from a biblical perspective.

Thought Questions:

1 After the Resurrection, Luke tells of how Jesus rebuked two disciples on the road to Emmaus for failing to recognize that the Old Testament Scriptures indicated that it was “necessary” for the Messiah to suffer and be rejected. What events and/or stories do you see in the Old Testament that point toward the “necessity” of Jesus’ death?

2 What stories and events in Scripture might have looked, at one point in time, like failures or miscarriages of justice had the endings of the whole stories not already been known? How can this encourage us in our Christian walk today?

Application Questions:

1 Why, in your opinion, does the message of the Cross continue to be a stumbling block for humans today?

2 The reality of suffering in the world is one of the most difficult issues that prevents people from believing in the existence of an all-powerful and an all-loving God. While there are certainly no easy or quick answers to the problem of suffering, what comfort and hope can we find in the necessity of Christ's suffering in our behalf?

3 The fact that Paul had to encourage the Christians in Rome not to be "ashamed" of the gospel (*Rom. 1:16*) indicates that Christians were facing public ridicule for their beliefs. In what ways are Christians ridiculed in society today?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Many people never really think about how necessary it was for Jesus to come as our Substitute. Use the following activity to help class members to reflect on this issue by first considering their own circumstances.

Activity: Ask class members to reflect on events in their lives when it was necessary that someone come to their assistance. What would have happened without this help? How did they express their gratitude in return? After sharing several stories, direct the conversation back to the lesson by asking what would have happened had God not done what was "necessary" for us? How should we be expressing our thankfulness to Him in return?