

WEEK 8—Acts 13-17; 1-2 Thessalonians

Luke's attention in Acts shifts now to Paul and those who travel with, support, and encourage him and the churches he is helping to start. His base of activity is Antioch, a city in Syria (see map)—which, being outside Israel, shows that the Gospel is taking hold among Gentiles and in the wider world. Jesus' prediction (see Acts 1:8) is coming to pass!

Paul sees himself as an apostle to the Gentiles, and he moves through Asia and into Europe, sharing the Gospel in homes, marketplaces, and around the countryside. Many are curious: some listen and turn toward Jesus; others are openly hostile. There will be some disagreement among followers of Jesus, too, as to Paul's interest in Gentiles—but at the Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15), those concerns will be laid to rest.

Paul continues his travels, and more than once will land in jail on account of his convictions. Indeed, his difficulties can make readers wince: Paul certainly goes through a lot in being attentive to the Lord's calling! But these challenges do not slow him down. He knew that things would get dicey (see Acts 9:16); he is also so convinced of God's love and peoples' needs that he simply cannot keep silent.

Acts 17 records Paul's visit to Thessalonica (see map below), a city in Greece. Paul's time there is cut short when people riot in response to Paul's message. But the 3 weeks he spends in Thessalonica is enough to plant seeds that will grow into a church, and some time later, Paul will write letters back to these believers, to encourage and instruct them in the way of Jesus.

1 & 2 Thessalonians show us how highly Paul thought of these people (see, for example, 1 Thes 1:7; 2:13-14). He wants them to keep going on the way of Jesus, even as he knows they will face pressures for doing so. As we listen in on this letter to friends, we can take real encouragement from Paul's words (see 1 Thes 5:16-21) as well.

One topic Paul addresses in both of these letters to Thessalonica has to do with 'the end' (chap 5 in 1 Thes; chap 2 in 2 Thes). The 'man of lawlessness' (1 Thes 2:3) may be a particular person, but it might also be that Paul is warning them about those who stand in opposition to Jesus—an opposition Paul thinks will intensify as days pass. Paul is not scared about this, and doesn't want his readers to fret, either—so he reminds them of the one who protects them and who will ultimately overcome evil (2 Thes 2:6-8; and look at Matthew 6:13 for Jesus' perspective).

