

## CONFRONTING THE EMPIRE

At Mount Sinai, God commissioned the Hebrew people to be partners in advancing his great plan of redemption by making him known to the Gentile world. As part of his plan to continue gathering Gentiles into the kingdom of heaven, God chose and commissioned Paul to be his herald of the good news that the long-awaited Messiah had come. Paul eagerly accepted this mission and traveled throughout the Roman world preaching the gospel of Jesus and demonstrating God's love to both Jew and Gentile. Everywhere he went—Jerusalem, Damascus, Ephesus, Athens, Rome, or the far reaches of the Roman Empire—Paul proclaimed Jesus as God's anointed, the Savior and Lord of the world that the ancient Hebrew Text said he would be.

Paul's teaching was clear: the redemptive work of Messiah Jesus opened the door for all people, calling them to reject the false gods of the kingdom of this world, submit to his reign, and experience "the obedience that comes from faith."<sup>1</sup> He instructed all those who believed to live holy lives that would affirm the gospel and bear fruit in the hearts of a watching world.<sup>2</sup> His mission was not simply to provide a different religious experience, but to present Jesus—the Jewish Messiah—as the one true Savior, Lord, and King who dispelled chaos and brought the peace of the kingdom of heaven—*shalom*—to all who followed him.

Try to imagine Paul's excitement as he left Philippi. He was leaving behind a community of Jews and Gentiles joined together as one family of Jesus followers. Already they had demonstrated their commitment to live in a way that displayed the *shalom* of God's kingdom in that Roman colony. As he walked west on

*Via Egnatia*, we can almost hear the thoughts he would later write:

*Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.<sup>3</sup>*

As Paul explained the gospel message in cities large and small, he often saw the kingdom of heaven come in power and bring peace to individuals and entire communities. But as Paul traveled closer to Rome, he increasingly encountered a world of chaos where a different "lord" and "savior" reigned. So the good news of the *shalom* of God's kingdom that Paul proclaimed consistently ran into opposition from the idolatry, immorality, injustice, and oppression that the gospel of Caesar called peace.

Ahead of Paul was Thessalonica, a city with a long history of experiencing conflict between kingdoms. As a port city poised between the Aegean Sea and the *Via Egnatia*, Thessalonica often was in the path of conflicting kingdoms seeking expansion to the east as well as to the west. It was the launching point for Alexander the Great's Hellenistic conquest of territory all the way to Egypt and India. But as the Macedonian kingdom waned, the Thessalonians faced increasing conflict with the Roman Empire expanding from the west. Eventually the city fell to Rome and, like the rest of Macedonia, was ransacked and nearly destroyed.

Nearly a century later, when the conflict between Marc Antony and Octavian (Caesar Augustus)—who favored an empire—and Cassius and Brutus—who favored a republic—erupted in battle on the Plain of Drama outside Philippi, Thessalonica once again had to choose which kingdom it would serve. They chose Marc Antony and Octavian, and when the alliance between the two victors led to war once again, the Thessalonians chose Octavian. When he became Emperor Augustus, Octavian generously expressed his gratitude for the Thessalonians' loyalty, providing funds for capital improvements and the amenities that defined

### Session Five: Confronting the Empire

Roman "peace." The Thessalonians gladly submitted to the authority of Rome, even worshiping Caesar as the divine son of god in exchange for peace, security, and prosperity.

So when Paul came to Thessalonica, the people had significant reasons to ensure that nothing would diminish the gospel of the divine Caesar or threaten the peace he bestowed. Would God raise up a "temple," a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit in the hearts and lives of his people, in that city too? Or would the kingdom already established there resist the kingdom of heaven that Paul proclaimed?

### Opening Thoughts (3 minutes)

#### The Very Words of God

*As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbaths he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah," he said.*

Acts 17:2-3

#### Think About It

As individuals and as a society, culture, and nation, we experience pivotal events in our lives and collective history. How do we experience these events become defining moments that shape and influence not only our lives but may impact generations to come. For Americans, some of these events might be the Civil War, the Trail of Tears, the Great Depression, the Holocaust, Pearl Harbor, or 9-11.

In what ways do you see that these, or other defining moments, affect our cultural consciousness, societal behavior, or personal response to situations we encounter today?

Which historical events might have affected the Thessalonians' response to the gospel message brought by Paul in about AD? Any ideas?

**Video Notes (33 minutes)**

**Alexander the Great: a legacy of conquest for Hellenism**

**Paul: ambassador of a very different kingdom**

**Thessalonica and the kingdom of this world at the time of Paul**

**Benefactions: great rewards in return for loyalty**

**“Good works” to honor Rome and its deified emperors**

**Advancing the worship of Caesar**

**The language of worship**

**Paul comes to Thessalonica and reasons from the Scriptures**

**The kingdoms of Jesus and Caesar collide**

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**A city in turmoil**

Are we armed to bring the gospel of Christ's kingdom to our world?

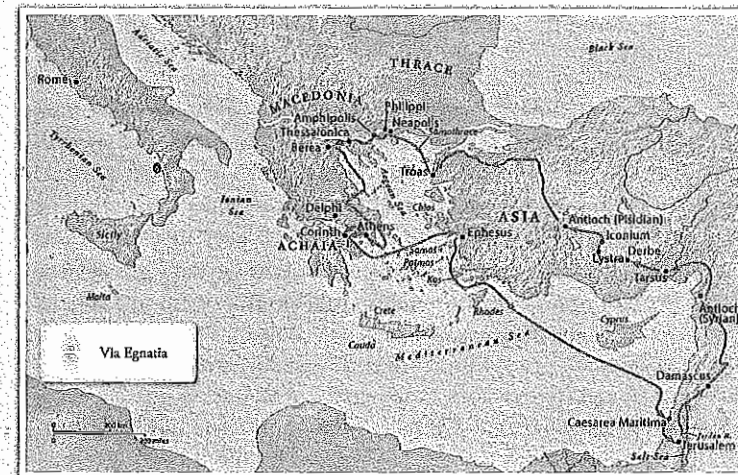
### Video Discussion (7 minutes)

1. In the Roman world, where people knew the price of being on the wrong side of *Pax Romana* and where about one-third of the people were slaves, how important was it to court the favor of the Roman emperor?

On the map on page 207, note the strategic location of Thessalonica, the first major city on the *Via Egnatia* east of Rome and on the route to Asia Minor. What risks might the people of Thessalonica face if the city fell out of Caesar's favor?

How high a price might you have been willing to pay for Caesar's benefactions?

2. Based on the video presentation, what did you discover about the role of conflict and conquest in the ancient world and the impact it had on ordinary people in the course of everyday life?



What have you realized about the delicate position Paul was in for bringing an opposing gospel—the gospel of Jesus Christ, the true Savior, Lord, and King—to Thessalonica?

3. What surprised you about the customary language of worship used in reference to the deified Roman emperors?

In what ways do you think such language helped or hindered the sharing of the gospel message? Explain your answer.

What do people hear and think when we say “gospel,” or “good news,” and to what extent do they respond to it as we expect they would?

### Small Group Bible Discovery and Discussion (12 minutes)

#### Paul “Reasoned” with Them from the Scriptures

Paul was born about the same time as Jesus into a family that was faithful to know and obey the Torah. While growing up, Paul also was a devoted and brilliant student of the Torah. He excelled in both knowledge and interpretation of the Hebrew Bible and studied in Jerusalem under Rabbi Gamaliel, a highly respected expert on the Torah whose interpretations were often similar to those of Jesus.

Known as the greatest of all Jewish sages, Gamaliel certainly influenced Paul’s teaching. As a disciple of Gamaliel, Paul was trained to apply the Torah to the Hellenistic worldview of Roman culture, a skill he used extensively in his role as the “rabbi to the Gentiles.” Paul also followed Gamaliel’s practice of writing epistles.

However, prior to meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul chose a path quite different from that which Gamaliel taught. Paul was intensely passionate about the Torah, as we might expect, and zealously opposed those who interpreted it differently from what he believed. In Paul’s time, zeal (*qana* in Hebrew) was understood to mean strong—even violent—action taken against those who compromised with the Gentiles and their ways, thus turning away God’s anger from his people. This led to his persecution of the followers of Jesus in an effort to destroy the early church,<sup>4</sup> an action that Gamaliel did not support. In fact, Gamaliel stated to the Sanhedrin that followers of Jesus should be left alone because if their teaching was not from God, it would soon pass away; and if it was from God, the Jews who opposed it would be fighting against God.<sup>5</sup>

Then, in a turn of events Paul never imagined, he met Jesus and learned that he was God’s chosen instrument to make the name and redeeming work of Jesus known to the Gentiles! Knowing the Text as he did, Paul realized that the commission Jesus gave him to take the gospel to the Gentiles was a continuation

of God's commission to Israel and the prophets. No wonder we see in Paul such an intense commitment to take the good news of God's kingdom to the ends of the earth. He can barely contain the privilege of being God's light to the nations so that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy: "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of your name. . . . Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people!"<sup>6</sup>

1. Where, according to Acts 17:1-4, did Paul and his companions go when they arrived in Thessalonica, and why?

Why was it important for Paul, a superb scholar of the Hebrew Bible, to know the Scriptures as well as he did in order to accomplish his mission in Thessalonica, and how effective was he as a result?

Where had Paul done this before, and what impact did he have on those who heard him? (See Acts 9:19-22; 13:2-5, 13-16, 32-44.)

### DID YOU KNOW?

#### God Prepared a People and a Place for the Gospel Message

God prepared the Roman Empire in many ways to receive the good news of the Messiah's coming. Some of these preparations had been in place for centuries. Consider, for example, the presence of Jewish communities in nearly every major city of the empire. Some of these communities were established between 740-722 BC as a result of the dispersion of captives by the Assyrians following their conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Other communities resulted from Babylon's conquest of Judah in 587-586 BC. Still other communities were established by refugees from these conflicts and by Jewish merchants who traded with cities throughout the Mediterranean world.

These communities of Jews became known for their devotion to the Text and righteous living in obedience to God's laws. The Jewish faith was a legal religion in the Roman Empire, which allowed synagogues to exist for worship. The synagogues ensured a biblically literate audience that would understand the message of the long-awaited Messiah. In addition, early followers of Jesus were viewed as being a part of the Jewish community and synagogue and therefore received the coverage of legal status in the Roman Empire. Indeed, the Jewish synagogues provided a fertile environment for the good news of Jesus to take root and flourish.

2. The response of a "large number" of God-fearing Gentile to Paul's "reasoning from the Scriptures" apparently upset the status quo in the synagogue of Thessalonica.
  - a. What was the source of the problem, and what trouble ensued? (See Acts 17:5-9.)

- b. Which accusation threw the entire city into turmoil, and why would this have created a major problem in Thessalonica? (See Acts 17:7.)
3. After the violent turn of events in Thessalonica, what was Paul's next move? (See Acts 17:10–12.)

What does this reveal about his commitment to the mission God gave him?

What was different about the way the gospel message was received in that city, and what impact do you think this had on Paul and the advancement of God's kingdom?

4. Paul's methodology for presenting the good news of the Messiah was to "reason" (*dielexato*) with people from the Scriptures. This means he did not "preach" the gospel message but instead followed the rabbinic practice of dialogue with his audience. He would use various texts from the Hebrew Bible to present and support his interpreta-

### Session Five: Confronting the Empire

tions, which his audience would then evaluate according to their understanding of the Text. For this method to be effective, both speaker and audience had to be significantly familiar with the Text, which would have been the case in Jewish synagogues. Also, by using God's Word as the basis for his message, Paul, in effect, claimed God's promise that the proclamation of his Word will always have the exact effect he desires: "It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:10–11).

- a. Which strategy did Paul continue to use to make the gospel message known in Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus, and what responses did he receive? (See Acts 17:13–23; 18:1–8, 18–19; 19:8–10.)

- b. Who else did Paul reason with when those who worshiped in the synagogue rejected the gospel message? How had he learned to do this, and how effective was his strategy?

### Faith Lesson (4 minutes)

At Mount Sinai, God gave his chosen people the mission to make him known among the nations. He established his people in the Promised Land where they were to demonstrate what life looked like when he was in control. At times God's people were faithful to their mission, but often they followed a different pa-

and served a different master—engaging in immorality, serving themselves while oppressing the poor, practicing injustice, and worshiping other gods. Eventually, God removed them from the Promised Land. He allowed the beloved temple to be destroyed and his people to be exiled to Babylon far away from the land they had called home.

During that time Jeremiah, the great prophet of God, wrote in a letter to the devastated exiles:

*This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (Jeremiah 29:4–7).*

Even while enslaved, God's people were still called to fulfill the mission! God instructed this tiny, enslaved minority who had no status or power in their world to remain faithful to God's commands and to be fruitful and multiply. And they did. As a minority, they lived out their faith in such a way that others—even kings who ruled over them—were drawn to the God of Israel.<sup>7</sup>

In Paul's day, Jewish people in the Roman Empire faced a similar situation. They were a distinct minority, at best perhaps 10 percent of the population. Despite hardship and persecution, they sought to live in faithful obedience to God and promote the well-being of the culture in which they lived. Large numbers of Gentiles were attracted to the living example of *shalom* they witnessed within the Jewish communities and chose to serve their God. Then Paul (and others) showed up with the gospel message, the good news that Messiah—the true Savior and Lord—had come! Not only did many Jews accept this news because it was true to the Text, but many Gentiles who had joined their communities believed as well.

But the climate for the new community of Jesus followers was risky. They lived under the shadow of Caesar's imperial cult, and nowhere was this more pervasive than in Thessalonica. The wor-

### Session Five: Confronting the Empire

ship of Caesar in Thessalonica was a significant gesture of gratitude for the benefits and special relationship the city enjoyed with Rome. Any threat to this mutually beneficial relationship even something as simple as the statement of the truth of the gospel of Christ or the testimony of a righteous life—would generate a strong reaction.

1. If we are going to be living witnesses of the truth of the gospel of Christ—representatives of God's kingdom—we must realize that we will be in conflict with the kingdom of the world that surrounds us. That, however, does not change the mission to which God has called us. If you are living a life that puts God on display, in what specific ways might you be considered a threat to the community or culture in which you live?

What can (and will) you do to make the most of this opportunity—not to win an argument or to show yourself to be "better" than someone else but to better explain and demonstrate the gospel message?

2. In many places today, the community of Jesus followers is losing status and influence within the dominant culture. How does this make it more difficult to fulfill the mission God has given you?



Conversely, how does this truth create more opportunities or make it easier?

### Closing (1 minute)

Read 1 Peter 3:13–16 aloud together: “Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. ‘Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.’ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.”

Then pray, thanking God for his faithfulness in redeeming us, his rebellious creation. Praise him for his graciousness in making us his partners in advancing his great plan of redemption. Ask for his guidance and help in making us willing disciples who will learn and obey his ways so that we too may be effective in making the gospel of Christ known. Pray for a heart of humility and love that displays God’s character in every encounter we have. May God’s kingdom come and reign in our world!

### Memorize

*Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.” But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.*

1 Peter 3:13–16