

PASTOR'S MESSAGE

PASTOR VINCE IOCONA

**Following in the Steps of St. Paul
Greece 2023**



Our incredible 10-day pilgrimage began in Thessaloniki and Athens as we journeyed along the steps of St. Paul and his apostolic mission to the Gentiles. Then it was off to Ephesus in Turkey and the Greek Islands of Mykonos, Santorini, Patmos, and Crete as we sailed the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas. Throughout there were many moments of grace and fellowship, not only with those who joined us on this journey, but with so many other Christians we met along the way, and the wonderful people of Greece. Thank you for this inspiring opportunity and I look forward to answering any questions that may arise as you read about this amazing experience.

The White Tower and a breathtaking view of Thessaloniki from the walls of the Byzantine Acropolis



Although some might consider a trip to Greece complete with a visit to Athens and a few Greek islands, skipping Greece's Macedonia region and its economic center of Thessaloniki in my opinion would be a shame. In Thessaloniki we discover all the diverse offerings Greece's second largest city has to offer. And like the rest of Greece, Thessaloniki has a long and rich history. The city was founded in 315 BC by Cassander who named

it after his wife Thessalonike – the daughter of Phillip II and the sister of Alexander the Great. As the regions second largest city after Constantinople during the subsequent Byzantine period, today, Thessaloniki remains a busy seaport and is considered Greece’s cultural capital offering many theaters, cinemas, and concert venues.

After leaving Philippi, St. Paul along with Silas and Timothy traveled to Thessaloniki. When they arrived, it is said that Paul went first, as always, to the synagogue, and for three Sabbaths he preached out of the Old Testament, showing the Jews and God-fearers that Jesus was the promised Messiah. A number of Jews and many God-fearers became Christians. (Acts 17)

The ruins of Ancient Philippi and the Egnatian Way



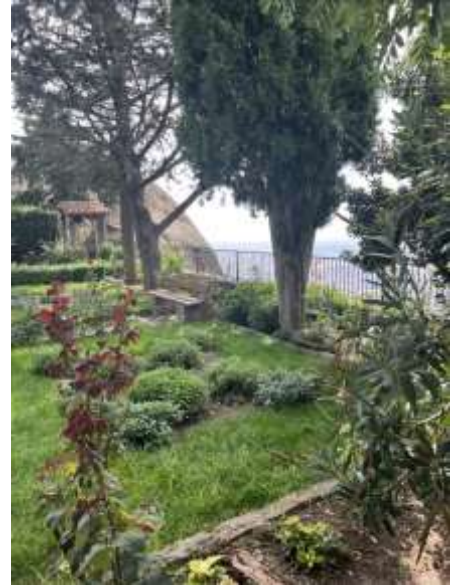
Philippi (left) is an old Greek city conquered by Philip of Macedon in 300BC and was re-founded over two hundred years later as a Roman ‘colonia’ by retired Roman soldiers and their families (see Map 24). Philippi was an important gold-mining center, and gold coins were minted there. It was a busy commercial settlement on the **‘Egnatian Way’** (right)– which was an important routeway leading west along the coast and, eventually, across the Adriatic Sea to Rome. (Acts 16:12)

When St. Paul arrived in Philippi for the first time, many women were gathered in the area. They were the first in Europe to hear him preach. As there are few Jews and no synagogues in Philippi, Paul and his companions went to the riverbank just outside the city on the Sabbath day and begin to speak to the women gathered there where he Baptized Lydia (the first convert of Paul on European soil)–from Thyatira– Lydia was a wealthy dealer in expensive purple cloth which only the most important Roman citizens were allowed to wear. (Acts 16:13-15)

Baptistry of Lydia and the location of her Baptism



14th Century Byzantine Monasteries of Meteora



At Meteora, located in the Pindos Mountains outside Athens, we visited St. Stephen Monastery, perched atop the sandstone spires that rise above its valley floor to heights of more than 1,200 feet. These sheer rock faces are honeycombed with caves where hermits have lived like cliff-dwellers for more than 900 years. To reach these monasteries, the early pilgrims were raised in nets by a pulley system. Of course, we took the “easy” way up by bus and only had to cross a bridge to enter St. Stephen, now a nunnery where nuns were tending a garden a few feet from cliff’s edge. This monastery is only one of seven that crown these mountains.

Setting Sail for the Greek Islands of Mykonos, Santorini, Patmos, and Crete



In Mykonos, called the island of windmills, we had time to experience the waterfront lined with its many shops and cafes, strolling the charming walkways through a maze of white-washed buildings. In Santorini, often referred to by many as the most breathtaking of all the Greek islands, we visited the town of Fira which clings to the volcanic cliffs of the island, did a little shopping, and enjoyed a traditional Greek meal as we sat atop the famous “Blue Domes” and soaked in its breathtaking view of the Mediterranean Sea.

The Monastery of St. John and the Grotto on the Island of Patmos



According to scripture, it is in the “Grotto of the Apocalypse” that God spoke to St. John who received the Revelation of God (the last book of the New Testament) and wrote about it. The Monastery of Saint John the Theologian is a Greek Orthodox monastery founded in 1088 in Chora on the island of Patmos. It is named after St. John of Patmos, who according to the Book of Revelation lived on the island when visions of the apocalypse came to him from God.

Heraklion Crete and the Knossos Minoan Civilization Excavations (dating back to 4000 BC)



This site was first excavated by Minos Kalokairinos in 1877. In 1900, Sir Arthur Evans undertook more extensive excavations which unearthed most of the palace we see today, as well as many now-famous artifacts including the Bull-Leaping Fresco, snake goddess figurines, and numerous Linear B tablets. Linear B is the name for the late Minoan script first found on numerous clay tablets and the ceilings in the second palace at Knossos on Crete. The Apostle Paul is said to have left Titus in Crete (Titus 1:5) and gave him instructions to appoint church leaders in the town.

Kusadasi Turkey and the Ancient Ruins of Ephesus



While the list of the ancient residents of Ephesus might read like a Who's Who of the ancient world, there is one name that stands above them all: the Apostle Paul, who made the city his base for more than two years while traveling in Asia Minor on missionary work.

When Paul came to this cosmopolitan city around the year 53, it was already home to a small Christian community. It was in Ephesus that Paul wrote his First Letter to the Corinthians, one of the best-loved of all the books of the Bible. While in Ephesus Paul tended to new converts and tried tirelessly to make more. Most in the city likely saw him as just another itinerant peddling his version of yet another deity.

In time, however, Paul's passionate preaching began to make waves in Ephesus, particularly among the artisans who crafted miniature versions of Artemis and her temple for sale to pilgrims and tourists.

When the silversmith Demetrius heard there was a man in the city saying that gods made by humans were not gods at all and should not be worshipped, he realized that his livelihood was at stake. Demetrius and his fellow artisans marched to the amphitheater shouting, "Great is Artemis of Ephesus!"

They found some of Paul's followers and hustled them along with them, creating a scene that threatened to turn violent. City officials intervened and Paul was forced to leave Ephesus.

Walking the "Harbor Road" in this ruined city of Ephesus today (seen in the photo above) one knows that Paul also once walked these same stones.

Ancient City Ruins of Corinth



In Corinth the largest city of its time in Greece, Paul spent 18 months preaching upon the Bema (the original use of the bema in Athens was as a tribunal from which orators addressed the citizens as well as the courts of law) to the Jews and Gentiles. The site is overlooked by an Acropolis housing the remains of the Temple of Aphrodite, goddess of love. In Corinth, Paul worked with Aquila and Priscilla, and his trial by Gallio took place in the Agora. The community he founded here caused him much grief and prompted him to write at least four letters.

Mars Hill



As I walked slowly through the crowd and across the rock, keeping a healthy distance from the drop on one side and given the centuries' worth of visitors to this location, I wasn't surprised to find the stone dangerously smooth.

As I stood on Mars' Hill where the Apostle Paul preached about the "unknown god" as recorded in Acts 17 I was truly moved. It was toward the end of my time in Greece, and I'd seen some truly incredible places: the monasteries of Meteora, the ruins of Corinth, Philippi, Ephesus, the Grotto of St. John and so many other wonders of the ancient world. But now back in Athens, I felt drawn to this mound of rock where a single man once stood in the face of the ancient Greeks' power and knowledge.

In the shadow of the Acropolis, as I looked down on the city of Athens the verses of **Acts 17:23-25** came to life: **"For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else."**

A plaque engraved with the Apostle Paul's sermon about the "unknown god" from Acts 17 (as seen below) is displayed at the bottom of Mars' Hill.



The Acropolis



The Acropolis of Athens and its monuments are a universal symbol of the greatest architectural and artistic complex bequeathed by Greek Antiquity to the world. In the second half of the 5th century BC, Athens, following the victory against the Persians and the establishment of democracy, took a leading position amongst the other city-states of the ancient world. In the age that followed, as thought and art flourished, an exceptional group of artists transformed the rocky hill into a unique monument of thought and art. The Parthenon built by Ictinus, the Erechtheon, the Propylaea, the temple of Zeus and the monumental entrance to the Acropolis designed by Mnesicles and the small temple Athena Nike.

The Ancient City Ruins of Delphi



Delphi is an interesting place to visit in Greece. It is famed for its Oracle and being the center of the ancient Greek world. Its most prominent exhibit is the Gallio inscription which is on display at the Delphi Museum beside the archaeological site. Legend states that Zeus wanted to find the center/navel of the earth, Gaia. He sent four eagles from each end of the earth (the earth was flat of course). These eagles met over Delphi proving that it is the center of the world.

Delphi was famous for its Oracle and the accuracy of her prophecies made Delphi one of the most influential places in the Greek world. All major decisions concerning the city-states and personal determinations were only made after consultation with the Oracle. Delphi remained as a center of worship even when Christianity became the official religion of the Rome Empire in the 4th century. The site was finally abandoned in the 6th or 7th century.

The apostle Paul would have known about Delphi and its relationship with Python and Apollo. In Philippi, he delivered a possessed slave girl of the Python spirit in Acts 16:16-18.

“For we walk by faith, not by sight,” wrote the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians. And on our tour of Greece and Turkey, we indeed strolled and sail by faith as we retrace the many missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul after he saw the light in Damascus. Our land and cruise tour to mainland Greece, the Greek Isles, and Turkey leads us to many significant sites of the New Testament as well as some of the most magnificent sights of the Mediterranean. Scripture has now taken on a whole new meaning as we visited the ancient communities where Paul established churches – and where he penned his epistles, including the Thessalonians, Philippians, Corinthians, and Ephesians. I must say that it was truly a humble experience to have made this journey. Greece is one of the few places on earth that can boast a history of over 5,000 years. In fact, no other place has contributed so much to Western civilization than Greece did during its peak some 2,500 years ago. Greece definitely lived up to my expectations and I thank you all for this amazing opportunity.

In His Service,

Pastor Vince