

Acts Series Part 48

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Date: 07 November 2010

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- [0 : 00] It is a very pleasant thing to be encouraged. I'm sure we can all echo that sentiment.
- We know what it's like when maybe we've been going through a tough time, and there is an encouragement in our lives. It can take different forms.
- But something that encourages us, something that heartens us, and that is pleasant, it's heartening, it's strengthening. And we are in the very blessed position as Christians to have a God who is an encouraging God.
- He knows us. He knows what we're going through. He knows when the going is tough for us. He knows when we need a lift, and we'll often tenderly place in our way an encouragement and we're going to see something of this in the passage before us this evening.
- Paul and Silas in Berea. As we know, we've been following their steps in these chapters in the book of Acts. They had been directed very clearly, unmistakably, by God to Macedonia.
- [1 : 25] And they followed that instruction. They went expectantly. The manner in which they had been directed was so special, this vision of a man from Macedonia.
- And we noticed when we were considering that, or we speculated at any rate what great expectation there must have been as they headed to Macedonia.
- What must be waiting for us there that God so clearly and in such a particular way has directed our paths in that direction?
- Well, what did await them at their very first port of call in Philippi? Well, certainly there were very real encouragements.
- We've considered those who were brought to faith. Lydia. We've considered the slave girl and how she was liberated from the oppression that she was under.
- [2 : 21] We've thought also of the jailer and his family. And so there were many encouragements, certainly, for Paul and Silas and those who accompanied them in Philippi.
- But there was also a great deal of opposition. They were the victims of cruel and vicious beatings. And, of course, they were imprisoned. It's interesting to notice how Paul recalls that experience in Philippi.
- In the book of Acts, we're not told what his opinion was of the treatment he received, certainly not in any great detail.
- But when he writes to the Thessalonians, in 1 Thessalonians 2 and verse 2, he does recall his time in Philippi and describes it for us.
- We can notice there in 1 Thessalonians 2 and verse 2, we read, we had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi. The idea there, or one manner perhaps to better capture what Paul is saying is, we had been shamefully treated in Philippi.
- [3 : 33] He's saying, yes, we reached Thessalonica, but before there we had been imprisoned, we had been shamefully treated in Philippi. That was not a pleasant experience for them at all.

And, of course, we know they were thrown out of Philippi. And their next port of call was Thessalonica. We were considering some of that this morning. What we didn't dwell on in any detail at all was the manner in which they were also effectively driven out of Thessalonica.

So here they are, responding obediently to the call of God to go to Macedonia, and yet the treatment they receive is, in the words of Paul, shameful, and they suffer greatly.

And I wonder, as we just paint the picture of what it is they had experienced thus far in Macedonia, I wonder how they felt as they made their way to Berea.

Were they afraid? They were men like us, men of like passions, with their own weaknesses, of course. Were they perhaps afraid of what awaited them there?

[4 : 44] Were they tentative as they considered what they would do? Thus far, they're heading to the synagogue, they're engaging with a Jewish audience, certainly in Thessalonica, had resulted in opposition, violence, and hostility.

Might they have been wondering whether it would be prudent to keep a lower profile? It certainly would seem to be true that Paul's intention was to return to Thessalonica, and this trip, or this stay in Berea, was perhaps almost killing time until that opportunity presented itself.

Again, in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, we get a feel for, certainly a hint, as to what Paul's intentions had been. Again, if we just turn to 1 Thessalonians 2, and on this occasion, verses 17 and 18.

Notice what Paul says as he writes to the Thessalonians. He says, But brothers, when we were torn away from you for a short time, again, the language is very intense.

These are very vivid memories of the treatment they had received when we were torn away from you for a short time, in person, not in thought, out of our intense longing, we made every effort to see you, for we wanted to come to you again.

[6 : 05] So they're thrown out of Thessalonica, but Paul wanted to return. Indeed, he says, again and again, but Satan stopped us.

Now, we're not given greater detail as to in what way, but certainly, the impression given is that it was Paul's desire to return to Thessalonica, but he had been unable to do so.

So they're in Berea, really very close to Thessalonica, maybe for that very reason, that it would have been a simple thing had there not been obstacles in the way to return. But that door did not open, it remained closed.

And so, as we will discover, they had to head in another direction. Well, I wonder, and we don't know, of course, we can't know for sure, but I wonder just how they felt as they made their way to Berea, especially if it had not been their intention to go there, especially if their desire had been to remain much longer in Thessalonica, as certainly appears to be the case.

Might they have been somewhat discouraged? Might there have been a sense of fear and trepidation as they head into another town in Macedonia?

[7 : 19] What would the reception be there? Well, whatever their sentiments may have been, whatever their mood was, what we do know is what we are told concerning the actions they take.

When they arrive in Berea, they head for the synagogue. There, in verse 10, it's clearly presented to us, on arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue.

You might think they were almost looking for trouble to head there straight away. But what actually awaits them is great encouragement. If we just read again the two verses that describe the reception they receive and the experience that they have here in Berea as we read it, let's try and imagine just how encouraging it must have been for them to be there in Berea, particularly in the light of all they had experienced, all the negative things that they had experienced thus far.

Now the Bereans, we're told, would have more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men. They were, we can be very sure, greatly encouraged by this reception, by the outcome of this visit to Berea.

[8 : 51] But let's just think a little further about what precisely was the cause of their encouragement. And I think even in these verses that we've read, we can identify three causes of the encouragement that God graciously granted to these missionaries who were faithfully fulfilling their mission, even in the face of such opposition and violence.

Three elements saw three causes of their encouragement. The first thing we can say is the eagerness with which the Bereans received the message.

That alone must have been a great encouragement, a pleasant surprise perhaps for Paul, the eagerness with which the Bereans received the message.

But also, a second source of encouragement was the care with which the Bereans examined the message. And then finally, and we'll think of each of these in turn, the manner in which the Bereans responded to the message.

These three things. Now, before we do consider them, it is worth noting, something that is perhaps very obvious, but I think it is worth highlighting, that the audience that we have here are not an audience of Christians.

[10 : 07] We often use this example of the Bereans to describe what would be a model Christian congregation of how Christians should respond to the Word of God, receive it eagerly, examine carefully.

And it's reasonable and legitimate to use the Bereans as a challenge in that sense, as a model. But it is worth stressing, and it makes it all the more remarkable, that though they were not a congregation of believers, certainly of Christian believers, though many of them, of course, did respond and believe.

Nonetheless, it is instructive and challenging to see the way in which they receive and respond to the Word of God. And it is a challenge, an example for us.

But let's think then of these three elements briefly. First of all, the eagerness with which the Bereans received the message. We read there in verse 11, they were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness.

There's, what might we say, there's a question here that we could maybe just pose as to whether what is being said here is that they were intrinsically of more noble character than the Thessalonians, or what is being said is that because they received the message in this way, that demonstrated them as being of more noble character.

[11 : 38] But it's not of great importance how we understand it, but rather focusing on this idea of their eagerness and asking the question, why? Why is this so?

Why were they more eager? Why are they described in this way? Why are they contrasted in this way with the Thessalonians? Certainly we're told there that they were more noble, where it would seem the language used, though it is indeed literally this word noble, or the English word that we would use, noble.

It would seem to suggest this idea of being more open-minded. They gave Paul a chance. The suggestion seems to be that in Thessalonica there were people there who had already decided that they didn't want to listen to Paul.

They already had their prejudices, they already had prejudiced that this man had nothing to teach them. This preacher who had appeared from nowhere, what can he teach us?

But in Berea, they were more noble, they were more open-minded, they were more willing to give this preacher a chance, to give his message a chance, to hear what he had to say, and not in a precipitate way or in a prejudiced way reject him even before they listened to the message.

[12 : 58] Were they impressed by his knowledge, given that they were open-minded, given that they were willing to give him a chance? Was their eagerness in a sense fueled by the fact that as they listened to this man, they were taken by his deep knowledge of the Scriptures, by the authority with which he presented his message to them, by his evident passion, the manner in which he presented it with such conviction?

Were these things that in a measure fueled, if you wish, their eagerness, and so they wanted to hear more? It seems possible that these may well have been reasons for it.

Was there perhaps for them a striking contrast between Paul's exposition of the Scriptures and what they were used to? Might it be that what they were used to in the synagogue, Sabbath after Sabbath was a very dull, repetitive, turgid diet of rules and regulations?

And here, there is a preacher who has a different way of presenting the truth, who has an evidently more passionate interest in the message that he is proclaiming.

Well, whatever the reason for their eagerness, this eagerness translates into rapt attention. They are with great care listening to what is being said.

[14 : 37] Now, of course, this does serve as an example for us, and indeed how much more for those of us who know the truth. It's also a challenge for those who seek to communicate the truth, certainly preachers, but also Christians, as we would present the truth concerning Jesus to others.

This challenge to present the truth in an attractive, in a winsome, in a gripping manner. Our current moderator, the esteemed minister of Smith and Free Church, is well known to say, I've heard him on two different occasions, say the following, it's impossible to be a boring preacher.

Some of us make a good job of trying to be, but what he really is saying there is that the content of the message is so gripping, so thrilling, so exciting, that you really have to try very hard to be a boring preacher.

Now, I don't know if you agree with that or not, but that's what the moderator says, so it must be true. But certainly the idea is that the message that we have is a message that, if it's presented with the authority and with the enthusiasm that it merits, will, to those who are open-minded, to those who are willing to listen, will create an impression.

And there is likely to be a willingness to listen and to at least consider what it is we have to say. What was it that they listened to with great eagerness, or what is it that they did with great eagerness?

[16 : 20] Well, we're told that they received the message. They received the Word with great eagerness. Now, here I think the language used is to be understood simply as they listened to the Word.

They listened to the message with great eagerness. This same expression is used by Luke on an early occasion in Acts to, I think, mean something rather more.

In Acts chapter 11 and verse 1, and we did comment on this when we were preaching on this chapter, as we were describing, some of you may remember, different ways in which becoming a Christian is described.

And there in chapter 11 and verse 1, where Peter is explaining to the leaders of the church in Jerusalem the conversion of Cornelius and his household, there the Gentiles are said to have received the Word of God.

And there that same term that is used by Luke describing the Bereans carries, I think, much more weight, where receiving the Word of God goes beyond simply an enthusiastic listening to what was being said to a taking on board and believing the message.

[17 : 32] Now, in Berea, some proceeded to believing the message. But here, where it speaks of them eagerly receiving the Word, what seems to be said is that they listened eagerly before coming to any conclusions, before deciding if they agreed or disagreed, if they believed or chose not to believe, but they listened eagerly.

And I am sure, as we think of how this would have been an encouragement to Paul and Silas, I'm sure, even at this level, even at this point, before there is an evidence of how they would respond to the message, it would have been an encouragement to Paul, the eagerness with which they listen.

Maybe if we could imagine after that first Sabbath in the synagogue in Berea, and Paul and Silas are going to rest in whatever lodgings that they had, and they're discussing the day and how it had gone, I'm sure that conversation would have been a very happy one.

Did you notice how they were listening? They were on the edge of their seat. Do you notice how they wanted to hear more? Do you notice how they seemed so interested in what we were saying? And Silas would say, yes, I was noticing that.

It's so exciting. I'm sure they'll want to heed us again. And they would have been so encouraged to see evidence that God had prepared the way and that God had even prepared these very people to listen in this manner to the Word of God and that God would grant that to us as we would preach the Word and indeed to each of you as believers as you would seek to share the good news of Jesus that He would place in your way those who would eagerly listen to the message that you bring.

[19 : 14] So that was the first source of encouragement, the eagerness with which they received the message, but also, secondly, the care with which the Bereans examined the message.

Well, how did they examine the message? We're told here in verse 11 also, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

We can say three things about the manner in which they examined the message that was being preached. First of all, they went to the source, like a good journalist who if he's going to write a story, he wants to get to the original source to make sure that what has been said, what he has been told is true.

So somebody comes and says, this has happened. Now a careless journalist would say, oh, that's an exciting story and write his article and it would go into print without having checked if it was true. But a good journalist will check his sources and this is exactly what the Bereans do.

This man is talking about the Christ. Paul's message would have been the same as the one that we're told about in Thessalonica, though here we're not told what he said, but it would have been the same.

[20 : 30] And the Bereans would have said, well, he's talking about the Christ. He's talking about how the Christ must die and suffer and rise again. Well, I wonder if that's true. Let's go to the source. Let's go to the Scriptures.

Let's check to see if what he's saying is true because if it says so in the Scriptures, then we'd be willing to believe it. But we're not just going to believe it because he's a good preacher, because he sounds good, because he's very passionate, because he seems very eloquent.

No. We must check to see if what he is saying is true. And where will we check? Well, we'll go to the Scriptures. That's where we'll be able to determine if what is being said is true.

They examined the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was true. So that's the first thing we can say about the manner in which they examined the message. But also, and it's related to this, they compare the message with the source, the Scriptures that they're checking day by day.

They compare what Paul says with the source with judicial care and attention to detail. The word that is translated here, they examined the Scriptures, is a word that would be used in a legal context, perhaps of a judge weighing up the evidence.

[21 : 50] And so, some say this and some say that, and he has to weigh the evidence. He has to carefully and without prejudice, without bias, with due care and attention, with integrity, weigh what is being said.

Consider all that has been presented and come to a conclusion. Is this true or is this false? Is this man innocent or is this man guilty? Well, here, the Bereans examined what Paul said with that care and attention.

And of course, in order to do that, they had to dedicate the time necessary for a proper examination. And so, we're told that they examined the Scriptures every day to see if Paul said, if what Paul said was true.

You see, every Sabbath just wouldn't have been enough. There was so much to examine. There was so much to study. There was so much to investigate. So many things that Paul was saying. So many amazing claims that he was making concerning this man Jesus that it just wouldn't be enough on one occasion every week to do so.

Their very excitement in wanting to discover if it was true was no doubt partly responsible for this desire to daily examine the Scriptures, to hear what the man had to say and to examine if it was true.

[23 : 16] I wonder what Paul felt as he was so clearly being examined himself. You see, it wasn't just really the message that was being examined.

As the message was being examined, he was being examined. He was being tested. I wonder how he felt. There perhaps would be preachers today who might feel threatened by those who would so carefully and so minutely dissect what they're saying.

But it ought not to be so. I'm sure Paul was encouraged by this. Paul would have welcomed this. Paul would have encouraged them in this endeavor to examine carefully what he was saying.

This is how they examined the message. They went to the source. They examined it carefully, judicially, with due care and attention. They gave the time that was necessary to do so.

And from that, and that's simply to draw out what is simply before us here in the verse. But from that, we can draw a couple of important lessons. The first one is that the description of the manner in which the Bereans examined the message confirms a Reformation principle.

[24 : 32] and the Reformation principle particularly of the perspicuity or clarity of the Scriptures. You see, what we're finding here is that these Bereans, they did not need to be professional theologians.

They didn't need to be paid religious representatives to be able, with an open Bible, to examine these things and come to their own conclusions. And this is a principle that was not discovered but rediscovered at the Reformation, that the ordinary man, the ordinary woman with an open Bible in dependence upon God can discover God's truth, can learn God's truth, can listen to the professionals, can listen to the religious elite and say, well, actually, what you're saying isn't true.

I haven't been to seminary, I haven't done all the studies you've done, but I've got an open Bible and I can look at what it says and with God's help I can come to conclusions and write conclusions. There is, I think, this lesson that can be drawn from what we are presented here concerning the Bereans.

And, of course, there is no need for a priestly caste to decide on behalf of the masses what the Bible says.

All of us, as priests of God, can turn to the Scriptures and study them and investigate and meditate upon them and with God's help discover His truth.

[26 : 08] And there is also here a challenge to the church that those who are preachers particularly are to present doctrine but not to indoctrinate.

It's not for us to in some tyrannical way impose on people, this is what you must believe because this is what I believe and I'm the expert and you have to accept everything I say.

Yes, the preacher is to preach with authority, but he must be open to challenge and to correction. Pride and perhaps a fear of being challenged is not a healthy thing in a preacher.

Yes, we seek with God's help to present the truth faithfully, but it is necessary for the hearer to turn to the Scriptures, to examine if what is being said is true and if it's not, not to remain silent, but to graciously and kindly and if necessary, firmly make that very clearly known to the preacher.

And of course, as that is a challenge to the preacher, so to the hearers, that you would, as the preacher preaches, go to the source.

[27 : 18] Is that what the Bible actually says? Is that what the text actually teaches? Test what is said. And of course, that will require time. The Bereans need to do it daily in order to in any way interact meaningfully with this preacher Paul.

They had to daily examine the Scriptures and come to their conclusions. But then finally, not only the eagerness with which they received the message, no doubt, a great encouragement to Paul and Silas, not only the care with which the Bereans examined the message, by no means something that Paul would have found threatening, but rather something he would have welcomed and found encouraging, but finally, the manner in which the Bereans responded to the message.

We're told of that in verse 12. Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men. What is actually literally said there in the first phrase of verse 12 is that many of them therefore believed.

The NIV chooses to leave aside the word therefore, but I think in doing so, we lose a connection that is intended to be there. And the connection, it seems to me, is that there is a connection between their eagerness and their careful examination and the eventual outcome, which is their belief.

Their eagerness, their attention to detail, their examining of the Scriptures was a contributing factor to them believing. Now, that is not for a moment to leave aside the absolute necessity of the Spirit of God moving in a man's heart and mind and will that he might believe.

[29 : 02] But it is to recognize that if there is an audience who eagerly listened to a message, if there is a hearer who carefully examines the Scripture, that person is more likely to believe than one who is close-minded, than one who, without even listening, has decided that this is not for him or for her.

There is a connection between their eagerness, between their careful examination and the outcome that many of them did believe. That points to an important truth also, that the message, if it is rightly presented, if it is correctly reasoned and argued and proved, as we were thinking about this morning, is a believable message.

If people would listen and consider the message objectively, a reasonable outcome is that they would believe the message that is presented.

And again, I stress, that is not to leave to one side the need for the Spirit of God to open our blind eyes that we might understand.

So many did believe. And this, of course, would have been a great encouragement, the greatest encouragement to the preachers, but not all. There is this blanket description of the hearers as being of noble character.

[30 : 29] The suggestion seems to be that all who listened could be reasonably described in that way, that all received the message, that all examined carefully, but not all believed.

There were those who, having listened eagerly, who, having examined carefully, did not finally believe. Now, why was that? Why do some believe and others not believe?

Did perhaps some not understand? Yes, they examined carefully, but they did not understand. They didn't, they weren't persuaded. Or perhaps some did understand, but chose to reject the message, very particularly when Paul would have made it clear to them that to accept this message involved not only some recognition that it sounded credible or it sounded reasonable, but that they would have to bow the knee before another king, one called Jesus, as we again noted in the morning.

Was it that that would have held some back? They listened eagerly, the message was interesting, it was challenging, it was intriguing, it was persuasive, but whoa, I'm not going to be bowing down my knee to any new king.

I'm willing to listen, I'm willing to debate, I'm willing to enter into dialogue, but that's as far as I'm willing to go. Well, of course, we don't know what the many and very reasons there might have been, why some believed and some did not.

[31 : 59] And again, though I fear that this is just undue repetition, again, in saying these things, there is in no sense denial that at the heart of this response is the work of the Spirit of God in a man or a woman's heart.

As we close, we've considered the Bereans, their eagerness, their carefulness in examining the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was true.

What about you? What about us? Are these characteristics that would rightly and honestly describe us as we listen to the Word of God?

Is there in us this eagerness and this care to consider and to examine? Or, perhaps more importantly, or equally importantly, how do we ultimately respond to the message?

Perhaps we too could be described as of noble character. Maybe you too are very open-minded and willing to listen. But being open-minded, though it is good, is not enough.

[33 : 15] Being eager, though it is a good thing, is not enough. Being careful to examine the Scriptures, though it is a good thing, is not enough. It would seem that in Berea, there were those who were open-minded, who were eager, who were careful, and yet ultimately did not believe.

And so, let us be very careful. It's not enough to be polite about the Gospel. It's not enough to be open-minded about the Gospel. It's not enough to be sympathetic to the Gospel.

It's not enough to examine and to study the Scriptures. All these things are important, but they must lead to a bowing of the knee before King Jesus.

That ultimately must be the response to the message that is presented to us. Let us be very sure that we receive, by all means, eagerly the message.

Examine carefully if it is true, but having established that it is, that we would believe and that we would bow down before another king, one called Jesus.

[34 : 22] Well, that God would help us so to do. Let us pray.