

## “THEY RECEIVED THE WORD WITH ALL EAGERNESS”

Acts 17:1–15

Key Verse: 17:11

“Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”

How do you react to the Bible? Are you: Intimidated? Burdened? Bored? In this record of Paul’s missionary journeys, the focus is on how people respond to the gospel. In Philippi, Lydia and the jailer respond with practical faith. They share their faith with those in their households and open their homes to serve new brothers and sisters in Christ. Now in Thessalonica and Berea we see a contrast in how people respond when the gospel is explained from the Scriptures. In Thessalonica, there’s a riot. But in Berea, something special happens. The author wants us to learn from the Bereans. What are we supposed to learn? What difference does it make? May God speak to us through his word.

In Philippi, Paul and Silas suffered a lot. They were beaten with rods, covered with wounds, feet fastened in the stocks, and up all night. In the morning they have to leave. They make their way on the Via Egnatia through Amphipolis and Apollonia to Thessalonica (1; see map). By horse, it would take about a day to get to each city.<sup>1</sup> For men who’ve just been beaten, it would not be an easy journey. But their goal is to get to Thessalonica, the largest city of the Roman province of Macedonia.<sup>2</sup> Located on the shores of a gulf, and just below some mountains, Thessalonica rises steeply above its harbor and has a great view of Mt. Olympus to the south (photo).<sup>3</sup> Unlike Philippi, Thessalonica has a synagogue; Paul and Silas go there for three Sabbaths (2a). In obedience to God’s will, they always go to the Jews first.

It says Paul “reasoned with them from the Scriptures” (2b). He’s going to do this in Athens (17:17), in Corinth (18:4), in Ephesus (18:19; 19:8–9), and in Troas (20:7). “Reasoned” literally means to have a dialogue, to listen and ask questions. One-sided teaching, or reading the Bible without thinking, may not help us. We need to engage with the Bible, personally asking questions and

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<sup>1</sup> It’s 33 miles from Philippi to Amphipolis; then 27 miles to Apollonia; then another 35 miles to Thessalonica. If Paul and Silas had to walk, it would take at least a few days longer.

<sup>2</sup> Today Thessalonica is the second largest city in Greece, with a long and storied history, and is one of the top tourist destinations in the world.

<sup>3</sup> Founded after the time of Alexander the Great and named after his half-sister, it later played a key role in establishing Augustus as the leader of the Roman Empire. See *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, article on Thessalonica.

finding answers. And instead of intellectualizing or avoiding it, we need to let the Bible show us our own needs and lead us honestly to Jesus.

Read verse 3. The word “explaining” is literally “opening.” Luke uses this word to describe how the Risen Jesus helped his disciples understand the gospel (Luke 24:32,45). The truths of the gospel can still be “opened” to us, even though we’re so slow to understand. If we ask him, God gives us the Holy Spirit, that we might understand what he has freely given us (Luke 11:13; 1 Cor.2:12).

Paul also is “proving.” He’s pointing them to specific Old Testament prophecies, and showing how each one was fulfilled in Jesus. He’s helping them see that “it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead” (3b). The Risen Jesus told his disciples the same thing (Luke 24:26–27,44–46). Paul is taking time to help people develop a reasonable, informed faith. He wants them to follow Jesus not because he’s stirring their emotions, manipulating or forcing them, but based on clear truths found in Scripture.

To prove that Jesus’ death and resurrection was necessary, Paul is also explaining *why*. Why did God inspire his prophets to describe Christ’s suffering and resurrection in the Scriptures, and then later, make it happen? It’s God’s way of bringing us his salvation and grace (1 Pet.1:10–11). Scripture shows that God is holy; our sin separates us from him. Our abilities, achievements, even our family, cannot save us. But God punished his only Son in our places to forgive us. God raised him from the dead to give us hope to be with him forever. It’s all by God’s grace alone. If we let go of everything else and trust only in his promises in Jesus, he saves us. Only in him are we reconciled to God. His death and resurrection becomes our new life foundation. And as we follow Jesus as King, suffer for him, give our lives for him, and depend on his resurrection power, God can bring this new life to others, as he did through Paul (2 Cor.4:10–12).

Look at verse 4a. Here, “some” means a few Jews. “Joined” doesn’t mean they just start hanging out; it means they identify with Paul and Silas, commit to the cause of Jesus, and probably are baptized. They become brothers in Christ. Look at verse 4b. Gentiles are much more responsive to the gospel. The good news of Jesus reaches even some leading women of the city. It suggests that many today are ready to respond to the gospel, if only someone explains it to them meaningfully.

Then the Jews get jealous. Why? Because all these devout Greeks have been coming to their synagogue, but now, no more. So they get some wicked men from the rabble to form a mob and set the city in an uproar. Then they attack Jason’s house. Why? Because Jason has accepted the gospel and opened his home to Paul and Silas (5). When the mob can’t find Paul and Silas in his house,

they drag Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities (6a). These new brothers in Christ are now suffering for the name of Jesus. Jason is brought in to explain why he “received” men who seem to have caused such a riot.

And what do the accusers say about Paul and Silas? Read verse 6b. “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also...” Obviously news has spread among the Jews scattered in the Roman world. Their words in one sense are false, but in another sense, true. In the gospel of Jesus there’s no political threat whatsoever; we’re not trying to topple governments.

But the gospel of Jesus does “turn the world upside down.” How so? It challenges this present evil age (Gal.1:4) to its core. The gospel of Jesus causes a revolution of repentance. In light of his glorious gospel, we repent of our pride, our idols, our materialism, our immorality, our self-seeking and indifference. We repent of living without accountability. In his gospel, we’re changed. We rid our lives of all corruption and put the people who produce it out of business. His gospel gives us a whole new way of life and thinking. If we used to be toxic, we become a blessing. If we used to be full of hate, hold grudges, and seek revenge, we now freely forgive. If we used to live for our own glory and ambition, we now serve humbly, for Jesus’ sake. If we used to always hide in darkness, we now come into his glorious light. The world desperately needs this kind of revolution. Let’s join the holy revolution of faith in Jesus!

Jason and the brothers also get accused of acting against the decrees of Caesar, by saying there’s another king, Jesus (7). This is referring to the issue of emperor worship. Christians refuse to worship any man, no matter how great he seems. We do fear God, and we do honor the emperor (1 Pet.2:17). But we’re eager for our King Jesus to come again to this world, and on that day, no more earthly kings or kingdoms will be needed. From the start, Paul and Silas taught new believers to live with Jesus as their King, to love and serve him, and even give their lives for him. The people and city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. They made Jason and the rest of the brothers give them money to promise they would not allow any further trouble, then let them go.

Jason is mentioned here four times (5,6,7,9). In his hospitality, he’s like Lydia and the jailer in Philippi. But Jason goes further. After doing good, serving, and sharing his home, he gets abused, accused and punished. He becomes an imitator of Paul and Silas, and of the Lord Jesus. He receives the word in much affliction but has the joy of the Holy Spirit. Jason is an example to all the other new believers in the area (1 Thess.1:6–7). We all need to learn Jason’s faith.

After the riot, the brothers immediately send Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. Berea is west and south of Thessalonica by about 45 miles (map). Just

below a mountain, it's a terraced town sitting on a slope overlooking a river, with springs nearby. So its name "Berea" means "place of many waters." Its scenic views and remote location make it a desirable place. When Paul and Silas get there, they go into the Jewish synagogue. And they're in for a surprise.

What happens? Read verse 11. "Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so." No doubt Paul is doing what he did in Thessalonica: reasoning, explaining and proving from the Scriptures that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead (2–3). But the response here is so different. In Thessalonica, Paul was doing all the explaining, and the Jews came to hear only on the Sabbath. But here, the Bereans themselves are examining the Scriptures, and they're doing it daily.

The Bereans are called "more noble"—not more aristocratic or high-minded, but more open-minded, more genuinely interested, and not easily susceptible to jealousy. We see how noble they are in the way they receive the word: "...with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so." Two things stand out here.

**First**, eager to receive God's word. The Bereans are not distracted, skeptical or cynical, sitting far in the back; they're "eager." They show up early and come close to Paul, to really listen. Maybe they've even got their notepads ready. The phrase "with all eagerness" means "having exceptional interest in being of service," and "having goodwill." They're not double-minded, sneaky, or trying to take advantage of him. They just sincerely want to be of help and know and understand this good news of Jesus.

**Second**, examining the Scriptures daily. Many people "tune out" someone who's teaching. They can't wait to get away and get out of there. But these Bereans can't stop thinking about what Paul says. They can't wait to get home and look into it more. Maybe they come to the synagogue daily to examine the Scriptures together. They don't just take Paul's word for it; they want to know for themselves. They pour over the Scriptures he mentioned to really check it out. The more they look at it with an open mind, the more they can see that Paul is right. Instead of remaining stubborn or opinionated, they're willing to change their minds if they see the truth. Anyone who reads the Bible with such an open mind will come to Jesus (John 5:39–40) and be changed by the gospel.

It reminds me of the story of Zvi Kalisher. He grew up as a Jewish boy in Poland. He lost both his parents to the Nazis in World War II, then emigrated to Israel. One day, a Swiss woman gave him a little black book, a copy of the New Testament. He had never really heard about Jesus. But as he began examining

the Scriptures, he realized that Jesus really is the Messiah. He was about 20 years old. Through the Scriptures God gave him the gift of faith, and Zvi lived the rest of his life as Jesus' witness, sharing his faith for the next 50 years.<sup>4</sup>

Once Jesus told the parable of a sower who scattered seed everywhere. Some fell on a path, some on rocky places, some on thorny places, and some on good soil. He said the good soil represents people with an honest and good heart, who hear the word, hold it fast, and bear fruit with patience (Luke 8:4–15). These Bereans are like such good soil. Honestly, what kind of soil are we? And what are we going to do about it?

David wrote, "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night" (Psalm 1:1–2). Is Bible study a burden or a chore to us? Or is it our "delight"? Paul wrote that "the sacred writings...are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim.3:15b). The sacred writings of the Scriptures are the greatest treasure in the world. But is personal Bible study our delight and our priority? In light of the Bereans' example, the best goal a church can have is to be a congregation who knows the Bible better than the pastors, and who share the Scriptures with others to lead them to Jesus.

In Berea, through such Scripture study, many believed, "with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men" (12). The Book of Acts shows that the Christian faith appeals to thoughtful people who have high positions in society.<sup>5</sup> "But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there, too, agitating and stirring up the crowds" (13). It again shows that the agitation comes not from Christians but from their enemies.<sup>6</sup> The brothers immediately sent Paul on his way, but Silas and Timothy stayed to help the new believers further (14). When Paul is dropped off in Athens, he asks for Silas and Timothy to come as soon as possible (15).

So how do you feel about the Bible? Burdened? Bored? Read verse 11 again. May God inspire us to receive the word with all eagerness and examine the Scriptures daily to really come to Jesus.

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<sup>4</sup> Elwood McQuaid, *Zvi: The Miraculous Story of Triumph Over the Holocaust*, (Bellmawr, NJ: Friends of Israel Gospel, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> 13:7 (Sergius Paulus, a Roman proconsul); 17:4,12,34 (Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus).

<sup>6</sup> 6:12; 13:50; 14:2; 17:13; 21:27; 24:12.