

# SCRIPTURE

*SERIES: THE GREAT ADVENTURE*

By Steve Zeisler

The text we're going to study in this message has much to say about the Bible. I hope you will bring away a sense of the extraordinary thing God has done in giving us this gift.

Acts 17:11 says, "Now the Bereans were of 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." The nobility of the Bereans lay in their passion for the Bible. They wouldn't even believe God's spokesman unless they were convinced that the text agreed with what he said. I long for that kind of nobility for us as well.

The novel *The DaVinci Code* is something of a literary phenomenon of the moment. It is the latest in a string of similar works. Books like that are a bit like Jonah's plant—they grow huge for the moment but shortly die off (Jonah 4:6-7). The reason *The DaVinci Code* has caught fire is because of the questions it asks, not the answers it proposes. Effectively it asks, "What does the Bible teach, and can it be trusted?" Those are important, enduring questions, and it is critical that we be sure of the answers. In *The DaVinci Code* and similar writings, the promise is that you can be let in on secret knowledge. This is the lure of Gnosticism, the earliest, and an enduring, heresy. Only the cognoscente, the insiders, know the hidden possibilities. The people who know only the plain text of Scripture and the simple gospel message, forthrightly declared, are fools. The advantages belong to the inner ring who know the secrets. We should not be surprised at today's version of this false theology. Such ideas cycle over and over throughout history. The tide will wash out this current version of Gnosticism, and the word of God simply stated, will remain powerful and life-changing.

A wise observer once said of the Scriptures that they do not need anyone to defend them. They are like a lion; if you turn them loose, they will defend themselves. The word of God endures forever. It commends itself. Let's be grateful that we are the recipients of such a gift.

We are working our way through Acts—a great adventure story. It is a bit like one of those old-time serials on the radio or television where the heroes are left in some kind of dire straits at the end of every show, and you have to wait till the following week to find out what happens next. Paul and his friends have now left the city of Philippi. Traveling west down the great Roman road, the Via Egnatia, they find themselves in the next important city in the region of Macedonia: Thessalonica. Philippi was an important city because it was a Roman colony. Thessalonica is a critical city because of its central location on both east-west and north-south trade routes. At this point the missionaries include at least Paul, Silas, and Timothy. Acts 17:1-2:

**When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures....**

They were certainly there much longer than the three or four weeks this implies, but it is difficult for us to know the total length of time involved. Verses 3-9:

**Explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.**

**But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob**

**and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.**

This is a little obscure. Jason was made to give some legal commitment that the men who had been staying at his house would leave town, and he was subject to some penalty if they didn't. Verses 10-14:

**As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. Now the Bereans were of 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.**

**When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea.**

Evidently Paul was the lightning rod time after time, wherever they were. The assumption was that if he left Berea, there would be no more trouble. Silas and Timothy had a lower profile, so they were able to remain teaching the emerging Christian leadership for an extended time. Verse 15:

**The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.**

I'm going to make some observations about the story, and then I want us to consider what we are taught about the word of God in this account.

## **In the crosshairs again**

The missionaries were taking advantage of Roman roads, Roman cities, and the Roman peace. God had arranged for Rome to build these highways so that his servants could travel to locations from which the gospel could spread.

We note that there were synagogues in both Thessalonica and Berea (remember, in Philippi there had been no synagogue). These synagogues had also been arranged by God ahead of time to be places of entrée for the gospel, where both Jews and God-fearers (Gentiles who were interested in God) would gather, ready to hear a word from the Lord. So the missionaries took advantage of these opportunities.

Once again there was a riot. It was the same kind of riot as in Philippi—mindless, furious, out of proportion to the cause of it. In this case the riot grew out of jealousy on the part of the Jews. They liked the status that went with being the local spokesmen for God and were jealous of losing that. But rather than arguing against Paul and Silas, they formed a mob to attack them. There will be mobs, riots, shouting, and public hatred displayed again before we are done with this book.

Paul and Silas were in the crosshairs once more, as they had been in Philippi. But this time, curiously, the jealous, angry people looking for Paul and Silas couldn't find them. We are not told why or where they were. So it was Jason, their host, who got hauled before the authorities, and he had to bear the brunt of the antagonism. Jason and the other brothers had no apostle or other strong, experienced Christian to stand between them and the anger that was being poured out at the cause of Christ. They were the ones who had to suffer. But

a legitimate inference is that Jason was made strong by taking this hit. Thessalonica became a great missionary church of confident and courageous outreach to its whole region. In the opening chapter of 1 Thessalonians there is a wonderful praise for these people because the word of God has boomed forth from them, and all of Achaia has heard of their faith. It is no accident that, having been attacked for their faith, they became strong enough to take it farther.

The last thing I would observe about Thessalonica concerns the excessiveness of the negative reaction. There weren't many men on this missionary team. None of them had any weapons. They weren't fomenting political change, arguing that the organization of these cities needed to be altered. They were talking about the love of God in Christ, about the great news of the Messiah who had come to die for everyone so that they could have life. Yet, whether it was the merchants of Philippi who found their economic base threatened, or the religious leaders in Thessalonica who were jealous that someone would take their place, repeatedly the missionaries received a strong negative reaction.

Consider the hyperbolic terms used to characterize them: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world..." They had not been all over the world. They had been to only a handful of cities. "They are defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." They were not challenging the right of Caesar to rule in Rome. They were talking about a King who said of himself, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). Time after time when they were examined it became clear that they weren't interested in changing laws, throwing out leaders, or bringing revolution of any kind.

But as we have noticed before, the forces of darkness knew what was really at stake. In fact, if somebody didn't quiet these people, the world *was* going to change. They didn't have to be revolutionaries or violent insurrectionists; they could tell this truth, and this truth would change things. Eventually the worship of Caesar would end, and the worship of Jesus would continue forever. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5, NRSV). When the light starts shining, the darkness worries!

It was exactly the same rationale for the death of Jesus. He didn't do anything that deserved death. He was guilty of nothing. The entire case against him amounted to trumped-up charges and lies argued in unjust courts—yet he had to be stopped. So the privilege of his followers is to be treated as their Lord was.

Let's also make a few observations about Berea, in verses 10-15. Luke takes note of women. In comments about Greek women and men, he lists the women first. In Thessalonica he also specifically mentioned women. Women were at the heart of the ministry in Philippi. They will be cited in Athens and Corinth and all the places on the journey. Luke is calling our attention to the responsiveness of women to the gospel, and this is no accident. He intends us to expect that where Christ was named, it would be good news for women. They not only became believers, but they had influence in everything that happened afterward.

Another thing we can note about Berea is that they didn't have their own mob. Rent-a-thugs from Thessalonica had to be brought in to cause trouble. But it was still the same mindless, aggressive, violent pushback to the cause of Christ.

Now, what do we discover about the word of God from this part of the journey? We have the privilege of reading the word of God whenever we choose. We have it in our own language. In English there are scores of translations and countless study helps available to us so that we may engage this gift of God. How does this text help us to value the Bible that is so familiar to us?

There are four words that I want to look at in verses 2-3, where Luke talks about the speaking of truth in Thessalonica. Then in verses 10-12 it is the hearers of the word who are in view in Berea, and there are things

we can learn from them as well.

## The ministry of God's word

Verses 2-3: "As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbaths he *reasoned* with them from the Scriptures, *explaining* and *proving* that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. 'This Jesus I am *proclaiming* to you is the Christ,' he said" (italics added). The ministry of the word consisted of reasoning, explaining, proving, and proclaiming.

Why is it helpful to observe that Paul reasoned from the Scriptures? This is telling us something about the power of the Bible. I have been in settings where the Bible is used to bludgeon, where it is shouted, where its message is intended to descend on people like a heavy weight in order to bring about some kind of change in their behavior, regardless of whether they understood it, believed anything different, or knew any more than they had known before. I have also been in settings that are mostly about an emotional stirring, where language is used in a way that bring tears to everyone's eyes. But once people leave, they can't remember what was said, and nothing has been learned. What Paul was doing in this synagogue reminds us that the Bible's power is ultimately the power to persuade us, to open our minds to understand what we didn't understand before. We become aware of truth in such a way that truth itself changes us. Paul reasoned, talked with people, listened to questions, and answered objections, expecting that the God of the Bible would take the words of the Bible and change people's interior life by them.

Then Paul explained and proved that Jesus was the Christ. These are the steps of logic, if you will. You explain things that people don't understand. There is a lot in the Bible that nobody understands when they first read it. Where are these cities? We've been talking about places we can locate on a map. We've talked about the customs of the Roman Empire. We've discussed what obscure words mean and how ideas fit together. There is a lot of explanation. This is again because we want people to be persuaded. Having heard things explained, they can go back and look at the text themselves, and it is not just the voice of the preacher they hear, but the text has now come alive to them. They can say as the Bereans did, "I want to make sure that is what it really says. You tell me what the words mean and then let me wrestle with the content."

Paul proved that Jesus was the Christ. The objection of these Jews would have been that Messiah should not have to die; Messiah should triumph. Yet Paul went back to their own prophets and proved that the intention of God from the beginning was that Messiah would suffer and die, be raised, and then reign. He proved to them from evidence that they had overlooked that Jesus was, in fact, the one who had been promised to them.

Finally, he proclaimed Jesus to them. He knew things they didn't know. The Son of God had been born in Bethlehem, had spent an extended time as an itinerant preacher, had finally been executed in Jerusalem, and had been raised again. Paul gave them information, announced things they hadn't known before.

At PBC we are occasionally taken to task for being a bit too impressed with intellectual discussion. I think that is sometimes a valid criticism. Just speaking for myself, I know at times I am uncomfortable with mystery. There is a great deal about God that will always be mysterious. He can make himself known in ways that are real and powerful and profound, yet impossible to explain. We cannot expect to understand everything.

However, that having been said, it is still the case that the Lord gave us our minds and that he has gone to extraordinary lengths to explain himself and instruct his children. It is possible for us to have what Paul later calls the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16). The foolish things we think can be replaced with truth and wisdom. We should receive this opportunity to think along with the Lord with gratitude. God intends us to grow in our understanding of his purposes, to joyfully agree with him. He intends us to worship him because we see coherence in his creation. The things he made fit together with the person he is. Past history makes sense because he has set future history in place and spoken to us about it. The Bible, written to be understood and

believed, is a magnificent gift.

What do we learn about hearing the word?

## Passion for God's word

Verse 11 says the Bereans *received* the word. They did so *eagerly*. They *examined* what they were taught. Often those who have stopped receiving the wisdom of God have done so because they have become too impressed with other voices, other explanations. Sometimes it is active disobedience that drowns out God's word.

Those who are good examiners of the Bible usually have multiple teachers, hear from more than one source of instruction and insight. They are open to learning new things. They want more than familiar answers repeated over and over. They want breakthroughs in understanding. They are willing to wrestle with the great themes rather than settle for platitudes and stale, familiar sayings.

It cost a lot of blood, sweat, and tears for you to have your Bible. Many of those who wrote it gave their lives to say what they had to say. Those who have preserved it in history went to extraordinary efforts, copying it meticulously, preserving it, saving it, defending it, loving it, in order for it to last century after century under attack.

It is one of the great accomplishments of the last century that the Bible has been taken virtually everywhere in the world, translated into many hundreds of languages and dialects. Again, people have paid an extraordinary price so that folks everywhere can have what we take for granted: the opportunity to read this book. It is self-declared to be the breath of God made firm in language so that we can be trained in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). The word of God in the hand of the Spirit will defend us from our enemies (Ephesians 6:17). It is the two-edged scalpel (Hebrews 4:12) that our Lord will use to cut away the self-deception that most of us live with. It is an extraordinary gift.

If we are not eager and joyful and grateful for God's truth, we need to ask why not. Why don't we value God's truth as the Bereans did? Amos warned of a coming day when there would be a famine for the word of God, when people would hunger for it and not have the opportunity to hear it (Amos 8:11-12). We have the opportunity and most of us aren't hungry enough. May God open our eyes in our prayers to changes, choices, repentance we can make so that we will hunger for more and more of him.

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