

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (7-11-1999 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Acts 17:10-15

Additional Bible Reading: Psalm 119:97-107

The People of Berea

Introduction

Paul and Silas moved on to Berea, 60 miles West of Thessalonica. All we know about the work in Berea is what we read in these verses. We have no letter written to the Bereans, and as far as we know there never was one. Today the city is called Veria, and the people are reminded of Paul's visit by a structure in a small park with the words, "St Paul's pulpit". The name "Berean" still lives on to describe someone committed to expository preaching of the scriptures, e.g. "A Berean expositor", or someone of the "Berean band".

The incident has been called one of the most beautiful passages in Paul's missionary labours. As usual, he went first to the Synagogue to preach to the Jews, and for the first time he received a warm reception from the Jews. **The Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians** (Acts 17:11), meaning not their social status, but the fact that they were less bigoted, fairer and generous minded. We are told that they received the message with eagerness, examined the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul said was right, and they responded and obeyed.

They were "people of the Book". Sadly today, even among evangelicals, low priority is given to the importance of daily and regular reading of the Scriptures. The strong influence of the Charismatic movement has led some to be more concerned with experiencing a spiritual high, than being taught the Word. A "great service" in some circles has more to do with the worship group than the expository ability of the preacher. People are not encouraged to really get to know the Scriptures and obey them, but rather to seek heightened emotions, feelings and experiences. The result is a growing Bible ignorance among the younger generation. The disastrous effects of this will be fully realized in 20 to 30 years time.

The Bereans submitted to the authority of the Scriptures

They received the message with great eagerness. They had never heard the Gospel message before. As Jews, they knew about the coming Messiah. These missionaries taught that there was no point continuing to wait for the Messiah – He had arrived. His name is Jesus. No doubt Paul did his usual, and went through the Old Testament Scriptures and showed how Christ's coming, death and resurrection fulfilled them. No doubt he pointed them to Isaiah 53 and similar passages about His coming and suffering. And these Jews received the message eagerly. They accepted and welcomed this biblically based Gospel.

The emphasis is on the Bible being supreme and sole authority on matters of faith and conduct. **All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work** (2Timothy 3:16,17). What we believe

about God, salvation, our attitude to Him, the kind of life which pleases Him, the resources available, is all found in the Scriptures.

The distinguishing mark of the Evangelical church is that its message is firmly based on the teaching of the Bible, the members are eager Bible readers, and they witness to the truths of the Bible which they have known in their lives. Why the Bible? The Bible is amazingly unified. It has the power to change men and societies. It is confirmed in archaeology. The prophecies of the Old Testament are plainly fulfilled in the New Testament. But the most important reason why we believe this book is because it is not man's word, but it is the Word of God.

Jesus Christ accepted the Old Testament as God's Word throughout His life and ministry. He emphasized its authority, He quoted it, and He claimed to fulfil it. **You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God** (Matthew 22:29), He said. And He also anticipated the New Testament. He chose 12 disciples who were eyewitnesses. He gave them the special gift of the Holy Spirit to **teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you** (John 14:26). **He will guide you into all truth** (John 16:13).

Our attitude to the Scriptures is bound up with our attitude to Christ. Obedience and study of the Scriptures is part of being His disciple. If we belong to Christ, we will want to heed His word, follow His example, and obey the Scriptures as He did and as He required others to do. We do not have the liberty to disagree or disobey Him. God took different personalities and styles of writers, He breathed on them, inspiring them to write down His words. And His Word is sufficient for all matters of faith and practice.

The Bereans examined the Scriptures daily

The Greek word used for examined is the same word that would be used for the careful cross-examination of a prisoner before a trial. Luke used the same word in Luke 23:14 to describe Pilate trying Jesus. It implies a careful sifting of the facts, a minute examination of the evidence. And this is what the Bereans did day after day.

There are two sides involved as we seek to understand the Bible – God and us. **Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this** (2 Timothy 2:7). We need the illumination of the Holy Spirit, for it is He who leads us into truth. We cannot understand the spiritual message of the Bible on our own. We need to be shown the need to be born again: **No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit** (John 3:5). We need to be shown the need to be prayerful: **Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law** (Psalm 119:18). We need to be shown the need for obedience: **If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out** (John 17:7).

But we also have a responsibility. We grow in knowledge as we are concerned to read the Scriptures and hear it expounded. We need to ask ourselves the straightforward meaning of the passage, for the Bible is not a complicated jigsaw full of obscure meaning. Picture language is used sometimes (e.g. mountains melting, God's fingers and eyes), and some is plain history and letters and laws. We must take into consideration how the first readers would have understood the passage in their culture

(e.g., washing feet was a sign of humble service). It is not meant to be read as a scientific textbook. It is amazing what the Bible can be made to mean when we are unscrupulous in dealing with it, or when we forget the context of the book. Always ask for God's light, and think about it wisely, carefully, honestly and sensibly.

Also important is the Bereans commitment to "daily" Bible reading. This challenges us, with our busy lives, to get our priorities right. Which is more important – the newspaper or God's Word? The TV or our quiet time? We neglect these at our peril. Years ago daily quiet time was stressed much more than it is today. Nowadays this is seen as too rigid and legalistic. We shouldn't then be surprised at Bible ignorance and spiritual shallowness in many places.

The Bereans' immediate obedience

The Bereans welcomed the message, checked it against their Scriptures, and then they obeyed it. **Many of the Jews believed** (Acts 17:12). They didn't just hold it in their mind, but they did something about it. They let it affect their will and heart and produce a change in them.

The Bible has many revealing descriptions of how the Word should affect us – we should tremble at the Word, prize it as gold, relish it as honey, rejoice over it as one finding great spoil, take heed to it, hide it in the heart, keep it, delight ourselves in it. Whatever we do, we must not close our eyes to it or stiffen our necks against it. Jesus warned that we shall be judged on the last day by the word He spoke to us.

God still speaks through His word. The Bible is not an antique piece which ought to be in a museum, but a lamp to our feet and light to our path. When we read it, we will find a promise to claim, a command to obey, a sin to avoid, gift to be thankful for, a blessing to seek.

Have you responded to the basic message of Scripture? Have you repented and believed in Christ? As Christians, are you living by the Word? Are you sharing it with others? **Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God** (Matthew 4:4). **Pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured** (2 Thessalonians 3:1). The more we give, the more we will be given.

Conclusion

How would we fit in with that little group in Berea? Would we feel at home there? Do we receive the Word, examine it and obey it? These issues are very important for our spiritual well being.

What are you doing with God's Word? Do you never read it? Have you no interest? Then this is a reflection of your spiritual state. You are dead spiritually, and not alive to God. If you were alive to God, you would have an appetite for spiritual things.

You say you have no time? Do you find time to eat, sleep, watch TV, work, read the paper, and all the things you *want* to do?

You say you read it and believe it, but do you actually live by it and let it rule your life? If not, you are likely to make many mistakes in life. You are very vulnerable if you are controlled by the values you get from the TV or the newspaper or people around. God will not be real to you if these are the things that influence you. You will never be established in the truth. You will not find guidance in times of trouble.

Spend time with the Word daily. Yesterday's bread is not sufficient for today. There is no emergency or condition for which the Bible does not have a word in season. It has enabled men to bear affliction, persecution, pain and bereavement and face death. But it won't be of use if it is never opened.

Honour the Bible in your families. There is an urgent need for family worship to be restored in Christian homes. On Webb Peplow's wreath, a flower depicted the open Bible, and under it a card read, "He loved it, he learnt it, and he lived it."