

Chapter 43: Eagerly Examining the Scriptures

Acts 17:1–15

On the surface, so many passages in the Book of Acts sound similar. Missionaries (now always including Paul, but others early on) come to an area. They preach the gospel in that area, and many people believe. Many others, however, resist the message and respond with varying degrees of opposition. Then, when opposition grows beyond a certain level, the missionaries move on to the next place to start the process again. Why have so many stories of the same series of events? One of the reasons is that each passage gives us a slightly different angle on that general pattern. Here, then, we hear a clear call for today: *respond to the Scriptures with faith*.

Right Reasoning (Acts 17:1–9)

Although Philippi did not have enough men to establish a synagogue (Acts 16:13), Paul does discover a “synagogue of the Jews” when he arrives next in Thessalonica (v. 1). This is important, since the pattern Paul sets down is to begin his mission work in every place he visited at the synagogue (“as was his custom”; v. 2). Christ had appointed Paul to a universal mission, as “a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15). So, while the unbelief of Jews often drove him to spend more of his time among Gentiles, he always began with the children of Israel, proclaiming to them that their long-awaited Messiah had come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

So, upon arriving in Thessalonica, “Paul went in [to the synagogue], as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures” (v. 2). This word for “reasoning” appears here for the first time in Acts, but becomes a common word to describe debates with the Jews and ordinary ministry in the coming chapters (Acts 17:2, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8, 9; 20:7, 9; 24:12, 25). Beyond “reasoning,” Luke tells us that Paul was “explaining and proving” something about Jesus. The first word for “explaining” has to do with opening something up to them, and, as Bock notes, it “recalls Luke 24:31–32, 45, where Jesus opened both the Scripture and the eyes of his followers after his resurrection.”¹ The second word carries the idea of setting something before others, like when the disciples set the loaves and fishes before the crowds (Mark 6:41; 8:6, 7; Luke 9:16; 10:8; 11:6). Specifically, Paul set before the Jews (in an effort to open their eyes) the necessity “for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead,” in order to identify Jesus as the Christ: “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ” (v. 3).² Lenski writes, “What prophecies Paul used we do not know; we naturally think of Isa. 53....This was new to the hearers, it had to be opened up to them. The Jews had the prophecies but in spite of them had formed a far different conception of the Christ whom they expected.”³

These efforts bore fruit, among the Jews, the “devout Greeks,” and even among the upper classes (“not a few of the leading women”; v. 4). Yet, as at Antioch Pisidia, the success of the gospel sparks opposition from the Jews: “But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble,

¹ Bock, *Acts*, 550.

² Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 343.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 692.

they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd” (v. 5; cf. Acts 13:45). We do not know much about Jason, except that he becomes the focal point of the opposition to the whole Christian movement in Thessalonica.⁴ When the mob was not able to find Paul and Silas, Jason took the blame: “they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, ‘These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus’” (vv. 6–7). It is unclear to what the mob is referring when they declare that the men had “turned the world upside down,” and it is possible that they are confusing Paul and Silas with other “outbreaks of Jewish unrest” around the known world during that time.⁵ The charge of treason against Caesar would have been perceived as especially dangerous by the authorities (v. 8). Yet, once the authorities received some money as “security,” the Christians were allowed free to go (v. 9).

Right Response (Acts 17:10–15)

As the opposition rises in Thessalonica, “the brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue” (v. 10). The missionaries are not fleeing their calling, but moving on to a new area to continue the work elsewhere, after spreading the gospel as far as they were able during the time they had. Then, upon arriving in Berea, they again begin their work in the synagogue.⁶ A shift from opposition and oppression to go to a new city, beginning with the synagogue, had been the same sequence in Thessalonica (after departing from Philippi). Will anything be different this time around?

In fact, Luke tells us that the Berean Jews were entirely different in their openness to the gospel: “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” (v. 11). This does not mean that the Bereans were credulous people, ready to believe anything a new preacher brought to their hearing. Rather, the eagerness with which they received the word from the apostles lay in the way that they were eager to judge the message against the Scriptures. On this eagerness, Polhill writes:

Luke described them as being “more noble” than the Thessalonians. He used a word (*eugenesteros*) that originally meant *high born* but came to have a more general connotation of being open, tolerant, generous, having the qualities that go with “good breeding.” Nowhere was this more evident than in their willingness to take Paul’s scriptural exposition seriously. They did not accept his word uncritically but did their own examination of the Scriptures to see if they really did point to the death and resurrection of the Messiah as Paul claimed (cf. 17:3). This was no cursory investigation either, no weekly Sabbath service, as at Thessalonica. They met daily to search the Scriptures.⁷

⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 361.

⁵ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 481.

⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 699.

⁷ Polhill, *Acts*, 363.

The last two sentences in this paragraph are important. In contrast to the Bereans, the Thessalonians only heard the word of God on Sabbath days, which suggests that many were only polite pew-sitters. That is, they received whatever he said without much concern about the substance of that message—until, of course, a few who did understand the substance of the argument began to become jealous at the progress of the gospel and began to attack the apostles.

The Bereans, by contrast, were eager to know the truth, even beyond the Sabbath day exposition of the Scriptures. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this posture. They were eager to hear the message, but they were not gullible people. Rather, they listened *and* evaluated the message in the light of Scripture. Calvin's observation is accurate, that "no doctrine is worthy to be believed but that which we find to be grounded in the Scriptures."⁸ The approach of the Bereans, then, is to seek after that truth from the Scriptures with eagerness: "The shining way of faith is to receive the preached Word with all eagerness—not with hostility, and to test and to examine every bit of it by the Scriptures and to accept only what agrees with them."⁹ From this posture, many believed, including both men and women of high standing (v. 12).

Even from a distance, the enemies of Christ learn from Thessalonica about the progress of the gospel in Berea, so they traveled to Berea to try to put a stop to it, as they had in Thessalonica (v. 13). Once again, the brothers send Paul off, although this time Silas and Timothy remained in the area to continue the mission in that area (v. 14). Paul, then, travels "as far as Athens," at which time he sends for Silas and Timothy to come with him as soon as they can (v. 15).

Discussion Questions

1. Why was it Paul's "custom" to go to the Jewish synagogue (vv. 1–2a)? That is, why do you think Paul put such a priority on evangelizing the Jews, even though he had been appointed as an apostle to reach the Gentiles to the end of the earth? Where have we seen him do that before? What do the various words ("reasoning," "explaining," "proving") for Paul's exposition of the Scriptures all communicate about what Paul was doing in his preaching?
2. What did Paul reason/explain/prove from the Scriptures about the Christ/Messiah (v. 3)? What do the Scriptures of the Old Testament say that makes it a necessity "for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead" (v. 3)? How does Jesus uniquely fulfill that Scriptural picture of the Christ? What has made it so hard for Jews across the centuries to see this truth? What is different among those who are "persuaded" and believe this gospel (v. 4)?
3. What makes the Jews at Berea "more noble than those in Thessalonica" (v. 11)? How do they receive the word? With what frequency? What do they do with the message that is preached to them? How does their own Scripture study prompt them to respond to the gospel? How are you receiving the preached word? How does what you hear on a Sunday prompt you to search the Scriptures to see if those things are so?

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:142.

⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 702.

4. What is your sensitivity to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments? How does that sensitivity manifest itself in your day-to-day study of Scripture? Where are you careless or sloppy in your approach to God's holy Word? Where do you fall short of putting your faith in what the Scriptures declare about Jesus the Christ: namely, that he suffered, died, was buried, and rose again from the dead?