

How to Learn Biblical Truth

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Please open your Bibles tonight to Acts chapter 17. The message before us is the second part of a two-part study. In the earlier portion, we considered how biblical truth is taught. Tonight we are turning the matter around and asking how biblical truth is learned. We are not dealing with a light subject. We are dealing with the way a man or woman receives the Word of God, tests what is preached, bows to what God has said, and becomes settled in truth rather than carried along by habit, emotion, tradition, or pride.

Acts 17 begins with Paul on his second missionary journey. Verse 1 says, "Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews." Paul did what he commonly did. Verse 2 says, "And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures." He was not entertaining them. He was not giving them personal opinions. He was reasoning with them out of the Scriptures. Verse 3 says that he was "opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ."

Some believed. Verse 4 says, "And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few." But not all received the message. Verse 5 says, "But the Jews which believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an uproar." They assaulted the house of Jason and tried to drag Paul and Silas before the people. When they could not find Paul and Silas, they brought Jason and certain brethren before the rulers of the city, crying that these men had turned the world upside down and had come there also.

The accusation continued. They said that Jason had received these men and that they acted contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there was another king, one Jesus. The people and the rulers were troubled when they heard these things. After they took security of Jason and the others, they let them go. Then verse 10 says, "And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews."

Now listen carefully to verse 11, for it is the heart of the message. "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so." Then verse 12 gives the result: "Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few." But the story does not end without opposition. Verse 13 says, "But when the Jews of Thessalonica had knowledge that the word of God was preached of Paul at Berea, they came thither also, and stirred up the people."

In this chapter we see three different responses to the gospel. In Thessalonica there was opposition. In Berea there was interest and reception. In Athens, later in the chapter, there was largely indifference. That raises a question that ought to make us think. Humanly speaking, why did Berea receive the Word when Thessalonica resisted it and Athens was so cold toward it? I am not asking that question in order to deny the sovereignty of God. I believe with all my heart that God is sovereign. Proverbs 16:1 says, "The preparations of the heart in man, and the answer of the tongue, is from the LORD." If any heart is prepared to receive truth, God prepared that heart.

Yet the question still stands. Humanly speaking, what was different about Berea? God does not work against the nature of man as though men were machines. God works in men. He ordains the end, and he also ordains the means that bring about the end. So when we ask why the Bereans received the Word, we are not pushing God aside. We are asking what means God used in them and what qualities Scripture itself identifies in them.

Turn for a moment to 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14. Paul writes, "But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." Notice the balance of the verse. God chose them unto salvation. Election is not an invention of men. The language of election is in the Bible, and it is there repeatedly. We do not have liberty to cut those words out simply because they trouble our systems or our feelings.

But also notice that God chose them "through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth." God not only ordained that his people would be saved; he ordained how they would be saved. They must hear. They must believe. They must repent. They must obey the gospel. They are called by the gospel. So when we return to Acts 17, we are not looking for something that competes with grace. We are looking at the very means by which God brought many in Berea to faith.

Acts 17:11 gives us the pattern. "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica." That is the first thing required in learning biblical truth: there must be a noble character. The word translated "noble" commonly refers to someone wellborn or of a noble family, but in Acts 17 it reaches beyond social rank. It describes a nobility of mind, a soundness of character, an honesty before truth. These Bereans were not praised because they were wealthy, educated, or socially important. They were praised because they handled the Word of God with integrity.

The same word appears in Luke 19:12, where our Lord speaks of "a certain nobleman" who went into a far country to receive a kingdom and return. In that parable, the nobleman points us to Christ himself. The word is also used in 1 Corinthians 1:26, where Paul says, "For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called." There the word plainly refers to those of rank, education, and standing. But in Acts 17:11 the nobility is moral and spiritual. It is the nobility of people who are willing to let Scripture judge them.

The Bereans heard Paul preach Christ from the Scriptures, and they did not answer with rage. They did not say, "We have never heard it that way before, so it cannot be true." They did not say, "Our fathers did not teach us that, so we will not listen." They did not gather a mob. They listened, and they searched. That kind of honesty is rare. It requires a man to say, "If the Bible says this, then I must change. If the Word of God proves me wrong, then I am wrong. If what I have believed contradicts Scripture, then I must give up my belief and bow to God."

The first step in learning is admitting that we do not already know everything. Many people never learn because they come to Scripture as though they have arrived. The Puritans used to say, "How many would be wise if they did not already think themselves so?" That is a searching question. A man who thinks he already knows cannot be taught. A woman who is determined to defend what she already believes at any cost is not ready to learn. We may study the Bible for a hundred years and still not exhaust it. No one knows all truth, and no one knows even one great biblical subject perfectly.

I remember training young men for the ministry and trying to give them opportunities to preach. One church about forty miles away needed someone to fill the pulpit after their pastor had left, so I sent one of those young men to preach. When he arrived, another preacher was already there, a man who was interested in becoming pastor of that church. The church asked the visiting preacher to teach Sunday school, and the young man I had sent sat down to listen.

The Sunday school lesson that morning was 1 Thessalonians chapter 1. That chapter has only ten verses. Verse 4 says, "Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God." The young man later told me exactly what happened. The teacher read verse 1 and commented on it. He read verse 2 and commented on it. He read verse 3 and commented on it. Then he skipped verse 4 entirely and went straight to verse 5. He never explained verse 4. He did not even read it.

Now there is something wrong when a man who claims to teach the Bible will not even read a verse because it contradicts his theology. He may not understand it fully. He may not know how to fit it into his system. But an honest man must at least say, "This is what the Scripture says." That is noble

character. It is not noble to hide from the Bible. It is not noble to pretend that difficult verses are not there. It is not noble to protect a tradition by refusing to hear God speak.

Years ago I heard Lester Roloff preaching from Ephesians chapter 1. I listened closely because I knew verse 4 was coming: "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world." When he reached that verse, he read it. Then he said, in effect, "Folks, the Bible says we were chosen in him before the foundation of the world. I will be honest with you. I do not understand the doctrine of election the way some men do, and I may not know how to teach it, but I believe it because the Bible says it plainly." That is honesty. That is the kind of spirit Acts 17 commends.

The opposite spirit is seen in Thessalonica. Paul preached, some believed, and others were moved with envy. They gathered wicked men, stirred up the city, and assaulted Jason's house. Later, when they heard that Paul was preaching in Berea, they followed him there and stirred up trouble again. That is what happens when pride rules the heart. A proud heart does not examine truth; it attacks the messenger. A proud heart does not say, "Show me from Scripture." It says, "I do not like this, and I will stop it if I can."

We must remember that the God who is sovereign in salvation is also sovereign in illumination. I may teach the Word as clearly as I know how, but I cannot open anyone's eyes. I cannot turn on the light in another man's soul. Only God can do that. That is why some are babes in Christ, some are young men, and some are fathers. They do not all see with the same maturity. My duty is to preach and teach faithfully. Your duty is to hear, search, and bow to Scripture. But if God does not give light, none of us will see.

That truth ought to make us patient with one another. If you do not yet see what I see, I should not be angry with you. If I do not see what you see, you should not be angry with me. We may reason together. We may set forth biblical arguments. We may open the passages and examine them. But we do not have to cut one another down because we do not yet agree on every point. Ungodly doctrine often produces ungodly conduct, and pride dressed up as zeal is still pride.

Isaiah 1 shows the moral preparation required for reasoning with God. The Lord says in verses 16-18, "Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD." Notice the order. Before God says, "Come now, and let us reason together," he says, "Wash you, make you clean." A man who clings to evil is not ready to reason with God. A man who refuses repentance is not ready for truth.

Amos 5:14-15 says, "Seek good, and not evil, that ye may live: and so the LORD, the God of hosts, shall be with you... Hate the evil, and love the good." You will never love good while you are defending evil. You will never seek truth while you are protecting error. Proverbs 21:30 says, "There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the LORD." It is useless to argue with God. There is no argument clever enough, no tradition old enough, and no feeling strong enough to overturn what God has spoken.

I once sat in a pastor's office while he and I talked with joy about the sovereignty of God. His secretary could hear the conversation from the outer office. Suddenly she came into the room upset and said, "I do not care what the Bible says. I know God is not like that." Her pastor looked at her and asked, "Did you hear what you just said?" That is the issue. Whenever we say, "I do not care what the Bible says," we have left the ground of faith. We may still use religious language, but we are no longer submitting to God.

It is hypocrisy to ask God for truth while refusing to turn from error. Why should we expect God to give us more light if we are determined to shut our eyes to the light he has already given? Many of us are deeply attached to what we were taught as children. I understand that. I was raised a certain way too. I respect my parents, and you ought to respect yours. But no parent, preacher, teacher, college, or denomination is the final authority. The Bible is the final authority. If Scripture corrects what we were taught, then Scripture must stand.

When God saved me and called me to preach, several pastor friends helped me and taught me. I loved those men. Later, at Bob Jones University, I met my first teacher who understood and taught the doctrines of grace. I knew what he was saying, and I did not like it. The hardest part was not merely that his teaching challenged me. It was that if he was right, then men I loved had been wrong, and I had been wrong too.

One day in class I stood up, pointed my finger, and told him he was wrong. He told me to sit down and be quiet and said he would see me after class. I was angry. Afterward he reminded me that he could have reported me to the discipline committee, but he would not. He said he knew I studied and believed I was honest. Then he gave me one assignment for the summer: "Always let Scripture interpret your experiences. Never let your experiences interpret Scripture." That sentence stayed with me.

During that summer the Lord dealt with me through his Word. He opened passages that I had not handled honestly. When I returned in the fall, I went to that teacher and apologized. I told him that if he wanted me to stand before the class and apologize publicly, I would do it. He had been right, and I had been wrong. That is painful, but it is necessary. To learn truth, we must have enough noble character to admit that God is right even when we have been wrong.

The second mark in Acts 17:11 is a ready mind. The verse says the Bereans "received the word with all readiness of mind." The word translated "readiness" carries the idea of eagerness, willingness, zeal, and a warm disposition toward something. It is not a cold, reluctant tolerance of preaching. It is a mind leaning forward toward the Word of God. It is a soul saying, "Speak, Lord; I need what you have said."

Paul used that same kind of language in Romans 1:15 when he said, "So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also." Peter used it when he instructed pastors in 1 Peter 5:2 to take oversight of the flock, "not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind." A true preacher ought to have a ready mind to preach. A true hearer ought to have a ready mind to hear. The pulpit and the pew both need spiritual appetite.

It is strange how acceptable passion is everywhere except in the things of God. A man may sit for hours on a hard bench at a ball game, shout until his throat hurts, endure heat or cold, pay high prices, and then rejoice if the game goes into overtime. No one calls him unstable. A hunter may rise long before daylight, sit in freezing weather, eat a cold sandwich, see no game, come home tired, and still say he had a fine day. No one thinks that is fanaticism. But let a person love the Word of God, study it deeply, attend preaching faithfully, and hunger for more, and suddenly people say he has gone too far.

We ought to examine that. Why can a person give hours to sport, hobbies, business, entertainment, and pleasure, but complain if the preaching of the Word runs a little long? Why can men concentrate on statistics, tools, equipment, markets, recipes, engines, music, or politics, but claim the Bible is too hard to study? The problem is not always ability. Often it is appetite. We make time for what we love. The Bereans had readiness of mind because they wanted truth.

Acts 20 gives us a striking example of hunger for the Word. Paul preached at Troas until midnight. Eutychus fell from the window and was taken up dead. Paul went down, embraced him, and the young man was restored. Then Paul went back and continued speaking until daybreak. I do not recommend careless exhaustion, and I certainly cannot raise the dead. But the passage shows that early believers were not offended by a long dealing with the Word when God was feeding them.

I have been in meetings where the Lord so blessed the preaching that people did not want to leave. After one service, the people lingered and talked, and I joked that if they were going to stay, I might as well preach again. They sat down, and I preached another sermon. When that was done, the pastor preached. Then I preached again. It was late before we left. That has not happened often in my life, but it shows something important. When God gives a hunger for truth, the clock does not rule the heart.

David said in Psalm 119:97, "O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day." That is readiness of mind. It is not merely reading to check off a duty. It is not dragging the soul to Scripture as though

God has nothing worthwhile to say. It is love, meditation, desire, and hunger. If we are going to learn biblical truth, we must ask God to give us minds that are eager for his Word.

Acts 13 gives another example. Paul and Barnabas came to Antioch in Pisidia and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day. After the reading of the law and the prophets, the rulers of the synagogue said, "Ye men and brethren, if ye have any word of exhortation for the people, say on." That was an invitation Paul did not waste. He stood up and preached the history of God's dealings, leading them to Christ. He declared that through Christ all who believe are justified from all things from which they could not be justified by the law of Moses.

When the Jews went out of the synagogue, the Gentiles asked that the same words be preached to them the next Sabbath. But even that was not enough. Many Jews and religious proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who spoke to them and persuaded them to continue in the grace of God. Then the next Sabbath day, almost the whole city came together to hear the Word of God. That is appetite. That is readiness. That is a people wanting more than a religious form. They wanted the Word.

What produces that kind of hearing? First Thessalonians 2:13 gives the answer: "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God." When preaching is received merely as a man's opinion, it will not grip the soul. But when a hearer understands that faithful biblical preaching brings the Word of God to bear upon the conscience, he listens differently. He says, "God has something here for me."

I learned a lesson about receiving what is given when I was in boot camp at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. The first morning I went into the mess hall, they served creamed beef on toast. I looked at it and thought, "I am not eating that." I had been raised on real breakfasts - eggs, grits, biscuits, meat, and the kind of food my mother made. So I walked out hungry. Soon after that, the sergeant called us into formation with full field packs for a long march over hills. About an hour later, that food I had rejected looked mighty good in my memory.

The army knew what was ahead for us that morning. I did not. They were giving me what I needed for strength, but I turned up my nose. In a far higher way, God gives his people what they need from his Word. He knows what lies ahead. He knows what trial, temptation, grief, duty, and battle are coming. When he sets his Word before us, we ought not despise it. We need a ready mind to receive what God gives.

The third mark in Acts 17:11 is a searching spirit. The Bereans "searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so." They did not merely admire Paul. They did not say, "He is impressive, so he must be right." They did not accept a sermon because it was moving, eloquent, or forceful. They compared the preaching with the Scriptures. That is not rebellion against preaching. That is the very thing God commended.

The word translated "searched" has the idea of examining, investigating, questioning, discerning, and judging carefully. It was used in the sense of a careful inquiry, like a judge examining a matter. In 1 Corinthians 9:3 Paul speaks of those who examined him. In Luke 23:14 Pilate examined Christ. The idea is not a casual glance. It is a serious scrutiny. The Bereans were not playing with verses. They were weighing what Paul said by the written Word of God.

Searching the Scriptures is more than running a few references in a concordance. It is more than reading a list of verses that seem to support what we already think. It means examining words, context, argument, doctrine, and application. It means asking, "What does the passage actually say? What did the Spirit of God intend here? How does this fit with the rest of Scripture? What must I believe, abandon, confess, or obey?"

Notice also the period of their searching. They searched daily. They were not spasmodic students of Scripture. They were not interested only during a meeting, a crisis, or a debate. They searched daily. Learning the Bible requires steady, patient, consistent labor. You cannot learn the Bible merely by attending Bible college. You may learn many things about the Bible there, and some of them may be

valuable, but no school can do your searching for you. You must read. You must study. You must compare. You must think. You must pray.

I am thankful for people who read their Bibles every day. Many read through the Bible each year, and that is a good thing. But let us be honest: it is better to understand one verse than to read forty chapters without knowing what they say. Quantity has its place, but it must not replace understanding. The Bereans did not merely read. They searched. They examined. They discerned. They wanted the truth to become settled in their own souls.

Proverbs 2:1-5 describes this kind of pursuit: "My son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments with thee; so that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding; yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; if thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; then shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God." Notice the words: receive, hide, incline, apply, cry, lift up, seek, search. Then, and only then, comes understanding.

If you knew that a chest filled with gold was buried somewhere on your property, would you dig one small hole and quit until next month? No. You would keep digging. You would turn over the ground. You would search until you found the treasure. God uses that kind of language for wisdom. He does not describe a lazy glance. He describes diligent pursuit. Truth must be valued enough to be sought.

That explains why truth so often slips away from us. We forget sermons because we did not labor over the truth preached. The preacher prayed, studied, wrestled with the passage, and prepared the message, but the hearer may have come casually, listened passively, and left quickly. Easy come, easy go. If truth costs us nothing in prayer, thought, repentance, and searching, we are far more likely to lose it. Proverbs 23:23 says, "Buy the truth, and sell it not; also wisdom, and instruction, and understanding." Truth that costs something becomes precious.

When I was a boy, my mother once asked me to take trash to the dump in our 1958 Ford. I would have done almost anything for a chance to drive that car. I took the trash, came back to the highway, looked both ways, and pulled out hard just to make the tires squeal. I was showing off because I was not paying for those tires. Later, when I was grown and married and had to buy my own tires, I did not drive that way. What costs you something changes how you treat it.

So it is with truth. If you have paid no price in study, prayer, humility, repentance, and obedience, you will not hold truth tightly. But when God has brought you through the Scriptures, humbled you, corrected you, and settled you, you will not sell truth cheaply. Proverbs 25:2 says, "It is the glory of God to conceal a thing: but the honour of kings is to search out a matter." There is honor in searching out what God has spoken.

Now return to the question with which we began. Humanly speaking, why did the Bereans receive the gospel when Thessalonica opposed it and Athens treated it with indifference? Acts 17:11-12 answers: they were noble, they received the Word with readiness of mind, and they searched the Scriptures daily to see whether those things were so. "Therefore many of them believed." God ordained the end, and he ordained the means. He gave them faith through the truth brought to them and searched by them.

Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:7, "Consider what I say; and the Lord give thee understanding in all things." Do not miss that order. Consider what is said. Think on it. Meditate on it. Compare it with Scripture. Then seek the Lord for understanding. God does not ordinarily put a man to bed ignorant and wake him up wise without means. He gives understanding as we consider, study, search, and pray over his Word.

There was also a blessed result in Berea: many believed. There was a beneficial result as well, though at first it may not look beneficial. The Jews from Thessalonica came and stirred up the people. Opposition followed the truth. But opposition often strengthens genuine believers. It separates wheat from chaff. It reveals who has merely been moved for a moment and who has truly bought the truth.

The world, the flesh, and the devil cannot finally overcome a man who values truth more than comfort, reputation, or even life.

Think of the martyrs of the early church. How do you explain men and women who would rather die than deny Christ? They had bought the truth, and they would not sell it. They did not value their own lives above the testimony of God. A shallow opinion will not carry a man to the stake. A borrowed conviction will not stand in the fire. But truth received from God, searched in Scripture, and sealed upon the conscience will endure.

Let me close with several applications. First, there will be no real growth in grace and knowledge while we cling to sin and error. Most of us know more about our sins than we care to admit. We do not always need someone to identify them for us. We know where we are resisting God. David said in Psalm 66:18, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me." If we cherish sin, we should not expect clear communion with God or deeper understanding of his Word.

Second Peter 3:18 says, "But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." Grace and knowledge are not enemies. They grow together. You are not growing in grace if you are refusing the knowledge of Christ. If you want to grow, you must turn from error, confess sin, receive correction, and embrace truth even when it humbles you.

Second, where there is no receiving of truth with readiness of mind and no searching of Scripture to discern truth, there will be no strong conviction for truth. Many compromise because the truth they claim never cost them anything. They received it as a habit, a slogan, or a tradition, but they never searched it out before God. When pressure comes, they let it go. But the one who has bought the truth will not sell it.

Our Lord said in Matthew 15, quoting Isaiah, that some worship is taught by "the commandments of men." What men merely teach as human tradition can be abandoned when fashions change. But what God teaches in the conscience through Scripture becomes precious. We need truth that is more than inherited language. We need truth learned from the Word of God.

Third, whenever truth is embraced, believed, and practiced, there will be opposition. Paul found adversaries wherever God opened doors. In 1 Corinthians 16:9 he said, "For a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries." Do not think opposition proves you are wrong. Sometimes it comes precisely because truth has begun to move. You cannot move without creating friction, and you cannot stand for Scripture without discovering that someone resents it.

Fourth, no one learns truth apart from the Word of truth. Our Lord prayed in John 17:17, "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth." Peter wrote that we are to desire the sincere milk of the Word that we may grow thereby. The Bible is our authority for faith and practice. We must learn to love it, learn it, and live it. We will live it only as we learn it, and we will learn it only as we love it.

How, then, do we learn biblical truth? We need noble character that says, "I am wrong wherever God says I am wrong, and God is right wherever he speaks." We need a ready mind that hungers for the Word, receives preaching as God's Word when it is faithful to Scripture, and values truth above comfort. We need a searching spirit that examines the Scriptures daily, not to defend our pride, but to know whether these things are so.

When those things are present, truth becomes precious. We have bought it, and we will not sell it. We will not trade it for tradition, popularity, ease, or the approval of men. May God make us like the Bereans - honest before Scripture, eager for the Word, diligent in searching, and settled in the truth of Christ.

Father, in the name of Jesus Christ, we ask for grace and mercy. Teach us to study. Teach us to build ourselves up in the most holy faith through thy Word. David said, "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word." He said, "With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments." He said, "Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee." Help us, Lord, to be holy and godly by loving thy Word, learning it, and living it. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.