

Ripples Part 23
Listening Expectantly
Acts 17.10-12

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You know we usually begin our messages with a prayer. This morning my prayer is the first verse of a classic old hymn called Break Now the Bread of Life.

Would you pray with me?

Break now the bread of life, dear Lord, to me,
as once you broke the loaves beside the sea.
Beyond the sacred page I seek you, Lord;
my spirit waits for you, O living Word.

* * *

I believe the central spiritual issue of our day is the question of authority.

Where do we turn to get answers to our questions about the way things really are, and how things really should be?

Who do we let answer our questions about identity? About morality? About how we run society?

Who do we trust? Whose answers to our questions do we consider reliable?

The passage we are looking at today is one that takes us straight into this question of authority.

It's the story of Paul's brief stopover in a small Macedonian city called Berea. And how the people there heard and took to heart Paul's preaching.

This passage is about how we listen when the Bible is taught. And behind that question is the question of authority, how we open ourselves, submit ourselves, to the truth of God's word.

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Before we jump into this, let me just say that what this passage holds up as exemplary in the Berean community is something that already characterizes our church family in an incredible way.

Some of you may remember my dear friend Lon Allison. He preached all over the world. He used to tell me that Covenant was his very favorite place to preach. Because of how you listen. I've had a number of other guest speakers tell me the same thing, even very recently.

I feel it too. It is almost breathtaking sometimes, when we come together into this part of our worship service and we open our bibles together, to watch you open your hearts to God and to his word. Sitting up, leaning in, open, engaged, ready to learn. It's humbling and it's beautiful.

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We're walking our way through the New Testament Book of Acts, and we find ourselves in the middle of what is usually called Paul's second missionary journey. Paul and Luke and Silas and their companions have crossed over from Asia Minor to Europe and have begun to make their way across Macedonia, which is northern Greece today.



First they come to Philippi and spend some time doing ministry there. Then they encounter resistance so they make their way to Thessalonica, all the way up in the upper left hand corner of this map. Then after doing ministry for a short time there, they run into more trouble, so off they go again.

Acts 17.10

As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea.

From Thessalonica Paul and Silas and their team travel west along the Via Egnatia and then south through the hill country to Berea, a beautiful terraced city built on the slope of a hill overlooking a winding river.

Acts 17.10

On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue.

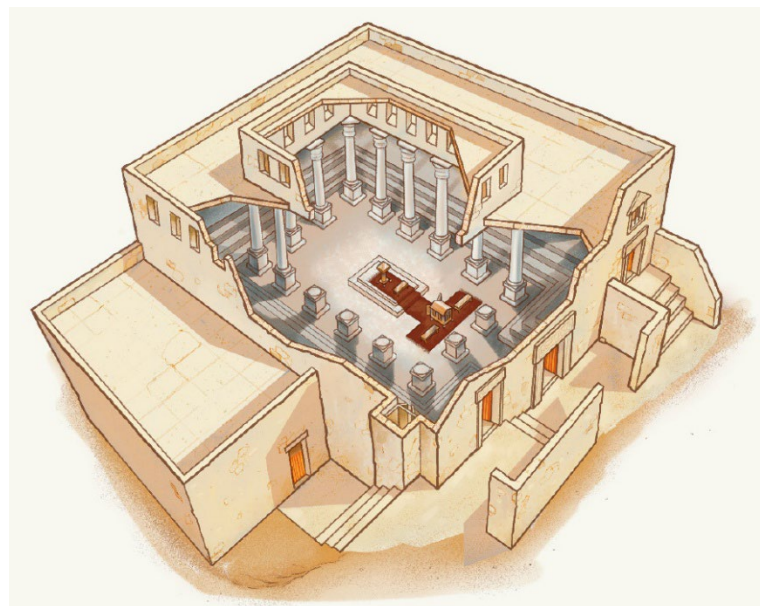
Just a bit of background about synagogues.

About six hundred years before Christ, the temple in Jerusalem, which up to that point had been the center of Jewish religious life, was destroyed, and the Jewish people were scattered into exile.

During the exile, Jews began to come together to worship, to study the scriptures, and to teach their children about the faith.

Eventually they began to build buildings that served as their meeting places. They were called "places of gathering" - *Beit Keneset* in Hebrew, and *synagogue* in Greek.

Each synagogue had a synagogue ruler, who kept up the facility and oversaw its use, and a rabbi, which means "teacher."



This is a drawing of a first century synagogue. At the center of synagogue life, reflected by the architecture, was the study of Scripture.

Each synagogue had its own collection of handwritten copies of the Scriptures.



Because books and printing hadn't been invented yet, the scriptures were all in the form of hand-copied scrolls: a single large one for the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, another one for Isaiah, one for the minor prophets, and a number of others for the psalms, the historical books, the wisdom books, and the other prophets.

During the week the scrolls were used to teach the children. And during worship on the Sabbath, one of the scrolls would be brought out, unrolled on the lectern in the middle of the room, read from, and then explained. Usually the rabbi would teach, but it was not uncommon for visiting guests to be invited to share.

Because they were so costly to duplicate, very few individuals would have owned their own copies of the Scriptures. Instead, to read the Bible, people in the community would have gone to the reading room in the synagogue and have the scrolls brought out so they could study them.

So Paul and his company went to the Jewish synagogue and began to carry out their ministry.

If we flip back just one town, to Thessalonica, we're given a pretty clear picture of what that would have looked like.

Acts 17.2-3

As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah," he said.

Luke tells us he does four things: reason, explain, prove, and proclaim. Those are the sorts of words you could use to describe the way my not-scintillating monotone accounting prof taught, but what Paul is actually doing is something much more engaging and participatory and appetizing

1. He *reasons*

This is identical to our English word *dialogue*. It means discuss, reason it out, think it through, wrestle together with how all the pieces fit together.

2. He *explains*

The imagery behind this word is the idea of opening up something that has been closed, bringing it out into the light, treasure from a treasure box.

3. He *proves* from the Scriptures that a Messiah has been promised, and that he must suffer and die, and then rise from the dead.

This word "prove" suggests the idea of spreading things out so someone else can see them, laying them out side by side so they can have a look

4. And he *proclaims*

He makes an announcement based on the Scriptures, Paul came to a conviction and he seeks to lead them to that conviction as well. His conviction is that the Messiah has in fact come. And that these promises have been fulfilled in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

During my recovery from eye surgery over the last week and a half I listened again to the wonderful old British classic *The Wind in the Willows*.

There's a scene that captures perfectly what Paul is doing with the Scriptures. At the beginning of the book, the mole meets the muskrat, who invites him to go rowing with him.

"Hold hard a minute, then!" said the Rat. . . . After a short interval [he] reappeared staggering under a fat, wicker luncheon-basket.

"Shove that under your feet," he observed to the Mole, as he passed it down into the boat. Then he untied the [rope] and took the [oars].

"What's inside it?" asked the Mole, wriggling with curiosity.

"There's cold chicken inside it," replied the Rat briefly; "cold tongue, cold ham, cold beef, pickled gherkin salad, French rolls, cress sandwiches, potted meat, ginger beer, lemonade, soda water-

"O stop, stop," cried the Mole in ecstasies: "This is too much!"

"Do you really think so?" enquired the Rat seriously. "It's only what I always take on these little excursions; and the other animals are always telling me that I am a stingy beast!"

After they rowed for a while . . .

The Rat brought the boat alongside the bank, made her fast, helped the awkward Mole safely ashore, and swung out the luncheon-basket. The Mole begged as a favour to be allowed to unpack it all by himself; and the Rat was very pleased to indulge him, and to sprawl at full length on the grass and rest, while his excited friend took out the table-cloth and spread it, took out all the mysterious packets one by one and arranged their contents in due order, still gasping, "O my! O my!" at each fresh revelation. When all was ready, the Rat said, "Now pitch in, old fellow!" And the Mole was indeed very glad to obey.

The Wind in the Willows, Kenneth Grahame, 20

The sumptuous meal Paul served up in Thessalonica was met with mixed reviews. Some were receptive.

Acts 17.4

Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women.

Acts 17.5-8

But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here. 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.

The word here for *jealous* has behind it the word picture of a pot boiling over. It refers to being seized with sputtering indignation when you encounter something different from what you are already convinced is true.

It means responding out of overblown zeal, a cancel culture sort of unwillingness to hear and engage with another perspective.

So, run out of Thessalonica, Paul and Silas travel down the road and come to Berea. He spreads a feast before the Bereans. Look at how they respond.

Acts 17.11

Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica.

"Noble" isn't about their social status or their wealth or their education. It describes the way that someone would relate to a stranger if he or she had a good upbringing: they would be mannerly and welcoming, not curt and rude.

What Luke is getting at is what happens when that same sort of graciousness comes in contact not just with a new person, but with a new perspective, a new way of looking at things.

I think NT Wright's translation captures the sense of the word really well. It says:

The people there were more generous in spirit than those in Thessalonica (NTE)

Luke goes on to explain exactly what *he* means when he says the Bereans are noble-minded in their response to Paul's teaching. He points to two seemingly contradictory impulses in the Bereans: an openness and a closedness, a softness and a stubbornness. Listen to what he writes:

Acts 17.11

Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

First, they received the message with great eagerness.

They took it to heart, they received it with gladness, they warmly welcomed it. This is the same word that is used in the gospels to describe the way Jesus welcomed children.

They received it, we're told, with *all* eagerness, with a heart that was ready and willing to receive, with a predisposition to accept it. It's the opposite of an arms crossed, brow furrowed, doubtful posture of scrutiny and suspicion.

This isn't gullibility. They weren't taking in Paul's teaching blindly or unthinkingly. Their minds were not dupable, and they were not closed. They were engaged.

And second, they examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

This is a term that comes from the court room. It refers to examining the evidence during a trial, comparing it to the law code, and then arriving at a verdict.

It implies and assumes an outside standard, an external source of authority. Something wasn't true just because Paul said it. Something wasn't true just because they believed it. It was only true if it lined up with their final authority.

So, we're told, each day they went back to the synagogue – this required some effort on their part, and suggests that it was something that they were doing together as a community – and pulled out the scrolls and investigated them, comparing what they said to what Paul said. "Hand me Isaiah, would you?" "Hey, listen to this from Malachi!"

Here are Paul's claims. Here the words of the Bible. Are the claims supported by the evidence? Do they stand up to the written record? Are these faithful conclusions?

* * *

So the Bereans received the message with great eagerness and they examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Two key qualities held in tension:

They combined receptivity with discernment:

- humility and teachability combined with unwavering submission to authority
- joyfully receiving the word preached together with faithfully handling the word itself
- eager to understand it and just as eager to stand under it.

Let me step back a few steps and think a bit more with you about what it might mean for you and for me to be marked by the same sort of generosity of spirit that marked the Bereans.

Let me look at them in reverse order: submission to the Bible's authority, and then teachability.

What does examining the Scriptures daily look like?

1. First, I think we see from the Berean's example that it implies **an unwavering belief in the Bible's authority**.

Evangelicals have a deep faith conviction that the Bible is accurate and trustworthy, giving us reliable information about God, about us, and about the relationship God desires to have with us

That lines up with what the Bible says about itself: II Timothy 3.16-17:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

As it turns out, fewer than half of those who call themselves evangelicals actually believe that. According to a recent Gallup survey (2022)

Only 40% of those identifying as evangelical hold that the entire Bible is the “actual word of God.” 51% consider only parts of the Bible to be the “inspired word of God,” and 8% of evangelicals agree with the statement that the Bible is [just] “an ancient book of fables, legends, history and moral precepts recorded by man.”

As Christians, we don't believe the Bible came to us from heaven without the involvement of human beings, like Muslims view the Quran. We believe that it is a collection of writings written by more than forty individuals over a 1500 year period, but that all of it was ultimately authored by God, and it is authoritative not because of how it supernaturally came about but because of who is its ultimate author. When we read the Bible, we are confident that God is the one who speaks to us.

2. But it's not enough to say we believe the Bible *speaks* with authority. **The Bereans submitted themselves to its authority.** Their heart posture toward Scripture was not that it was a way of winning arguments but that it was a way of changing lives – starting with their own.

They took to heart that behind the authority of the Bible stands the King. It is his prerogative to have the last word, to direct our lives by his loving rule, which implies a submittedness of our wills to his. We don't just open our minds when we open the Bible, we open our hearts, we open our lives.

Jesus, our King, our final authority, quoted Scripture in a way that made it clear he believed it carried the authority of his heavenly Father. It was God's word by which we are to *live*. He invites us to see it in the same way.

I love the straightforward way Psalm 119 expresses that.

Psalm 119.73

You made me; you created me.

Now give me the sense to follow your commands.

3. So following the example of the Bereans means receiving the Bible as God's word to us, and seeking to place ourselves under it.

But I think it also means we will be **marked by a heart of humility when it comes to the challenges of interpreting the Bible.** When they encountered Paul's teaching they didn't just dismiss it out of hand just because it didn't agree with theirs. They took his teaching seriously and weighed it carefully, because they wanted to interpret the Scriptures faithfully.

As followers of Jesus, I think it is important for us to understand that while the Bible is authoritative, it only has its *proper place of authority* in our lives when it is rightly, faithfully, interpreted.

Let me say that again: the Bible is authoritative, but it only has its *proper place of authority* in our lives when it is rightly interpreted.

Think of prescription medicine. A prescription comes with the authority of the medical community, but that doesn't mean it reflects their wisdom and authority if I use it in whatever way I please: if I leave it on the shelf and don't take it, or if I take however much of it I want whenever I want, or if I pour it on my house plants. Medicine needs to be rightly put to use. Just as scripture needs to be applied rightly.

And there are all kinds of things that make it challenging to rightly apply the Bible.

In the essential teachings of the Bible – who God is, who Jesus is, what his death accomplished, who we are, what it means to have a relationship with God – there is incredible clarity and agreement.

But the Bible doesn't come to us in the form of an encyclopedia. It doesn't lay out an alphabetic compendium of all the information we'd like to have from God in a single tidy volume. Think of all those different scrolls in the synagogue. It comes in the form of a jumbled collection of histories and letters and songs and visions and speeches and covenants.

So it addresses some of the things we'd like to know, and have God's views on, but certainly not all – at least not with the exhaustiveness and clarity we'd like. And there are many things we'd like it to address that it doesn't touch on at all.

In his excellent book *How to Read the Bible in Changing Times*, Mark Strauss point out that:

Scripture has little or nothing (specific) to say about a [whole] range of contemporary issues, such as abortion, euthanasia, gambling, drug abuse, genetic manipulation, stem-cell research, illegal immigration, socialism, capitalism, [partisan politics, affirmative action], war and pacifism, global warming, environmental care, child abuse, birth control, transsexuality, [and artificial intelligence]. (page 38).

That should humble us.

Certainly there are many biblical passages that *inform* our thinking about those issues, so we *can* arrive at thought-out biblical positions on them. We can communicate with confidence how the Bible informs our thinking on these issues.

But there aren't any passages that address those issues *directly*. Not one of them says, "Now, about diversity, equity, and inclusion," or, "Concerning your question about party politics." Which means that, reasoning from the same book of Scripture, devoted followers of Christ may well come out in different places on the same issues.

That requires of us a posture of humility as students of the Bible. The Bible is authoritative, but my understanding of it might not be.

In I Corinthians 2 Paul talks about the challenge of those who are more spiritually mature coming to a different understanding about the teaching of Scripture than those who are less spiritually mature.

And in Philipians 3 he acknowledges that even among those who are all equally spiritually mature there are different views on different passages of Scripture, and that it will only be over time that God by his Spirit will bring us to a place of unity.

When it comes to the challenges of interpreting Scripture, I really do recommend Strauss's excellent book. He offers a humble and faithful approach that I think is really worth reading.

* * *

Alright, now let's go back and explore the other part of being Bereans. Holding fast to the Bible's authority, let's see what we can learn about receiving someone's teaching with eagerness. What might that mean for us?

I think two qualities would mark us if we were like the Bereans in this way.

1. The first is **theological modesty**. That's a term I like very much that I came across a long time ago somewhere in the writings of New Testament scholar Colin Brown.

Theological modesty means that as I am arriving at my positions on what the Bible teaches, I keep in mind that there are others who love Jesus more than I do, and who have studied the Scriptures more carefully than I have, who have come out in a different place than I have.

There is a theological tension here for us as evangelicals that we don't often recognize that I think can get us into lots of trouble.

As we've already said, a core tenet of evangelicalism is a high view of the inspiration and authority of Scripture. We are confident that the Bible is accurate and trustworthy and that its source is in God rather than in human wisdom or speculation. That rightly gives us great confidence and boldness that we have the truth in our hands

But we can fail to hold that conviction alongside our biblical understanding of human nature. Our biblical understanding of authority tells us we have the truth, but our biblical understanding of humanity tells us that when it comes to our interpretation of Scripture, we may be wrong.

Of all people evangelicals should be the quickest to affirm a posture of theological modesty and the possibility that we are mistaken in our understanding of Scripture. Our own authoritative scriptures tell us:

Jeremiah 17.9

The human heart is the most deceitful of all things,
and desperately wicked.
Who really knows how bad it is?

Psalms 19.12

None of us can see our own errors; deliver me, Lord, from hidden faults!

And James 3.1-2

Dear brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers in the church, for we who teach will be judged more strictly. Indeed, we all make many mistakes.

Just because I have the Word, which is without error, and I have the Spirit, who is the Spirit of Truth, that doesn't mean that my interpretation of the Spirit-given word will be without error.

Even as we affirm the authority of the Bible we have to affirm that our understanding of it may be wrong. Which is at the heart of what lets us be open to the teaching and insight of others.

But we need to do more than *acknowledge* that we may be wrong. We need to be *willing* to be wrong. Which means being willing to learn from someone else's perspective.

James 3.17 says:

The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, *submissive* ...

That word "submissive" means that we are teachable. We could be mistaken. And there is always more to learn.

So if we are reading a book or listening to the teaching of a respected and trustworthy teacher, and they say something we disagree with, we don't need to close off. We can ask: I wonder why they drew that conclusion? What would lead them to say that? Is there something they see that I don't see? Which is exactly how the Bereans listened to Paul.

2. That leads to the second implication of being Bereans when it comes to being receptive to the teaching of others. They show us what it looks like to be **insatiably curious** about the Bible. Not curious about what some guy on the interweb says about how the book of Jude predicts an alien invasion on Halloween Day. (It doesn't – and as far as I know no one says it does.)

But becoming insatiably curious students of Scripture ourselves.

Think about this. What makes the bible so difficult to interpret? Cultural distance: language, customs, figures of speech, the historical significance of certain places and certain people, and so on.

So what makes us more faithful interpreters? Closing the cultural distance. Become intimately familiar with the scriptures. Learn about the language. Learn the customs. Visit the places. Get to know the people.

I guarantee you, the more you become insatiably curious, and the more you let your curiosity lead you to answers, the more the nonsense that people are teaching will become obvious, and the more the intended meaning of Scripture will become clear.

One example: Matthew 5.41.

Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two.

Meaning? If your friend asks you to go for a walk in the morning, and you're tired, but they're full of energy, and they want to go farther than you do, well, buck up and get some extra exercise because it's good for you.

Nope. Roman soldiers by law could grab any Jewish citizen at any time and force them to carry their sixty-five-pound pack and their helmet and their shield or anything else for two thousand steps in any direction they wanted.

So if the person you resent and despise the most takes advantage of you, and selfishly inconveniences you for their own selfish ends, don't resent their intrusion every step of the way and then rid yourself of them at the first possible moment, Turn their act of mistreatment into your act of love. Get to know them. Choose to love them. Treat your enemy as you would a friend. Go out of your way to love them and serve them.

Just one of thousands of examples of how the Scriptures come to life when we let ourselves be curious. Let's follow the example of the Bereans and became insatiably curious students of Scripture.

If you're interested in learning more, let me mention two great resources. One is: Craig Keener's *The Bible Background Commentary*. Awesome resource. It gives cultural background section by section. There's also one for the Old Testament.

Another great book I'd recommend is called the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, also put out by Intervarsity Press. It explores all the different images from the world of the Bible that are so central to the Bible's teaching, things like light and water and sheep and wheat and pottery and being the first-born. Incredibly helpful.

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In the Berean church God holds up an example for us to follow. In many respects, he also holds up a mirror for us, reflecting back to us a beautiful and humble posture that he has already been forming in us of seeking both to understand Scripture and to stand under it.

As we conclude, let me ask you: what is God's invitation to you this morning?

How are you encouraged and how are you challenged by the Berean's example?

How do you hear God's invitation to grow in strength of conviction about the Bible's authority?

How do you hear God's invitation to grow in gentleness of spirit and humility when you hear the Bible taught and as you arrive at your convictions about what the Bible says?

Would you pray with me?

This is the air I breathe. Your holy presence, living in me.
This is my daily bread. Your living word, spoken to me.

Speak, O Lord, as we come to you.
Your servants are listening.