

There is no Fear in the Truth

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[0 : 00] I wonder how you react to surprising information or news when you're told something that is almost too impossible to be true.

Like news, I've got a photograph there of some Puerto Rican fishermen that caught the world's largest lobster, weighing 150 kilos, 2.6 meters in length.

Now we tend to be slightly skeptical at first, and then we sort of go, is that really true?

Then we might start to consider, where did this information come from? Is it a reliable source? Like for example, is it from Facebook that I got it from? Are the details sort of consistent on the picture? Does it look sort of right? Or could this photo be tempered with? You can ask me later whether you think it's true or not. But some of us are naturally more believing than others, aren't we?

[1 : 11] But we all like to think that, you know, we've got this finely tuned antenna to pick up lies and rubbish. Well, in our passage today, we encounter another two cities.

And Paul and Silas, as they have been doing, as they've visited across the Roman Empire, they've been bringing surprising information and news, namely the gospel, to the cities.

And today, they come to Thessalonica and Berea. And I've got a picture there on the map in the outline and on the screen as well. It's up right to the top there on the top left, relatively close to each other, and just a little west of Philippi, where we were last week in that city.

And in these cities today, we again encounter two starkly different responses to the gospel. We also see how truth can be confronting, especially when it's a seismic kind of truth that has a huge impact on our lives, when it puts into question how we've been living all this while.

So, let's look at what these two responses might be. First, however, let us get to the city of Thessalonica with Paul and Silas. So, verse 1, when Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue.

[2 : 38] As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days, he reasoned with them from the scriptures, explaining, proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead.

This Jesus I'm proclaiming to you is the Messiah, Paul said. And so again, Paul begins, as he normally does, at a synagogue in a city, if there is one.

And that's because he's trying to engage his listeners with the scriptures, the Old Testament, which has the promises of the coming Messiah to the Jews. But for many Jews in his day, this piece of information that Paul was bringing to them was surprising because Paul was preaching that the Messiah had to rise from the dead.

Now, the actual content of Paul's sermon isn't given here, but if you go back to chapter 13 and look at what was preached to the Pisidian Antioch City, you'll get an idea of some of the passages that Paul might have used to show how this was true.

Now, that was all surprising because the Jews was expecting a king, but not one that would suffer, not one that would have to rise from the dead. And so this was surprising news for his listeners.

[3 : 52] And so we see varied responses. That's given to us in verse 4, where we read, And so we see at first that there's a variety of people that actually did believe, didn't they?

So there were Jews who were persuaded, as were some God-fearing Greeks, that's Greeks or Gentiles who had converted to Judaism, and that's why they're in the temple. And Luke makes it a point to make note that there were both men and women, in fact, prominent women at that.

But also we get an opposite response, don't we? Because in the very next sentence, other Jews were motivated by jealousy and rounded up a mob to start a riot.

They tried to find Paul and Silas so as to drag them out to harm them. Now, unfortunately for Jason, that is, Paul and Silas weren't there, and so they turned on him instead.

Next verse. But when they did not find them, 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, and Jason has welcomed them into his house.

[5 : 30] 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-born and let them go.

So poor Jason, he was guilty of, you know, found to be sort of responsible simply for aiding and abetting Paul and Silas.

Now, of course, as we've already seen last week, the charges of these Jews are essentially baseless, isn't it? These men have caused trouble all over the world.

Really? Really? I think the truth is more that those who hate Paul's message have been causing trouble around the world or the empire, as is the case now.

So who really is the troublemakers here? I think it's pretty clear, isn't it? Going and stirring up and sort of forming a mob to start a riot.

[6 : 34] And in any case, when someone comes and is simply showing the scriptures to be true, how is that ever about causing trouble? Of course, what the Jews have done is use a small snippet of Paul's teaching, small but not insignificant, the snippet being that Jesus is the Messiah and therefore the rightful King of Israel.

They've used that piece of information and then pushed that to the line that Paul is now defying the authority of Caesar and the Roman Emperor.

Well, I'm going to come back to this a bit later, but I want to move on now to the second city in order to see a different response to the gospel. So verse 10, As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea.

On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. So we're not quite sure where Paul and Silas were holding out in Thessalonica, but Jason and the believers found them.

And for their sake, Paul and Silas decide to leave and head to Berea, which is 45 miles away. And again, on arriving, they enter a synagogue and proceed to do the same, preach about Jesus.

[7 : 48] This time, however, there's a different reaction. We read, 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.

Now maybe the Thessalonian believers also did a similar thing, but Luke makes it a point to note that the Berean Jews here were of more noble character. Now I don't think that Luke was trying to say that they were of nobility, you know, of that class, higher class than the rest, but rather it was their character.

It was how they approached the gospel differently. They received the message, we read, with great eagerness, meaning that there was an openness to receiving the truth.

On the other hand though, it doesn't mean that they blindly accepted what Paul said. Rather, it says here that they examined, studied scripture to see if what Paul was saying was true.

And they were doing it every day. So this suggests care, a systematic approach, so they weren't just dismissing Paul offhand, you know, it doesn't seem right, too good to be true, let's just forget it, no.

[9 : 09] But on the other hand, they weren't being gullible either. You know, whatever Paul says, got to be right. You know, wow, this is great news, got to be right. No, they examined scriptures diligently every day.

And I think Luke notes this in order to commend this same approach to us. But as a result, verse 12, many of them believe, perhaps, I think, suggesting with the words, more than in Thessalonica.

And, again, as did also a number of prominent Greek women, Luke tends to like prominent Greek women, and many Greek men. You know, it doesn't matter whether they're prominent or not.

Now, unfortunately, that would all have been great, wasn't it, if it just ended there. But unfortunately, the Jews in Thessalonica got wind of it. And so, when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, some of them went there too, agitating the crowd, and stirring them up.

It makes you wonder, why are they so caught up with something that's not true? Why get so agitated? It also reminds me a little of Paul himself, remember?

[10 : 21] Before he became a Christian, he wasn't content to stop preaching in Jerusalem either, but he went all the way to Damascus, right? Seeking out God's messengers and Jesus' disciples, so as to persecute them.

So, sadly, Paul's ministry in Berea comes to an end. And, again, for the peace of the fledgling church there, we read, the believers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea.

Those who escorted Paul brought him to Athens, and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible. So, this time, however, at least Silas and Timothy were able to stay, to keep building up the church.

Paul, however, he's the lightning rod, the spokesperson, and so, he leads, heads to Athens. And so, sadly, despite the noble character of the Bereans, Paul's work in Berea was put to stop anyway, because of the stirring up of these Jews, just as it was in Thessalonica.

And so, as I said, that's the story so far. It's a pretty short passage. I'm going to leave it there for today. And instead, what I'd like to do is spend the rest of our time thinking about that question, which I've got near the bottom of the outline.

[11 : 41] And that is the question, why are we often fearful of the truth? Or more precisely, why are we afraid of the truth when it's opposite to what we believe or are committed to?

Why are we afraid of the truth? And if you think about it, we often are, aren't we? Now, I can think of a number of reasons for the Jews in Thessalonica, well, their motivation was jealousy.

Their own popularity, their falling that they had, were all being threatened. What they valued was being taken from them or at risk of being taken from them.

And so, they were reacting out of self-interest. There are other ways our self-interest can threaten or make us fearful of the truth as well. So, last week, we saw the money-making potential of the owners of that female slave threatened.

Their personal well was being taken away. And so, again, they responded by being afraid of the truth and trying to hound that truth out of their presence. And I can imagine that for us, at other times, we may not, for example, want to look foolish because when we are wrong, it makes us, we feel, look silly, doesn't it?

[13 : 04] it threatens our reputation and so we fear the truth. But, of course, that doesn't really make sense, does it? When we know what is true, that's when the truth is really clear and we see people sticking doggedly to what's wrong, it doesn't enhance their reputation, does it?

Imagine if I kept saying, no, the earth is flat, the earth is flat. I'm going to just stick to that. That's not going to, everyone knows that's false.

It makes me look foolish, doesn't it? For wanting to change my mind. Instead of enhancing my credibility, it actually undermines it, doesn't it? And that's why the Bereans were commended for their noble character.

That was the nobility in their character. Their approach to seeking out and working out what's true was very fair-minded. They were willing to weigh up the evidence.

They were willing to change their minds and admit that they are wrong if needs be. And that approach actually enhanced their standing, made them noble in the eyes of Luke.

[14 : 18] So what they were doing is not just blindly trying to defend their reputation, which is what sometimes we think we're doing by not changing our minds, not being open to considering alternate views, but instead they built their reputation by being open-minded to new information, to assessing them on their merits.

And friends, that ought to be our posture as well. Whether we're Christians or not, we should be like the Bereans. It's not that, oh, if you're not a Christian, then that's how we should approach searching the Scriptures.

And once we become a Christian, we close our minds and, you know, stick doggedly and, you know, not consider alternatives. No. I think Luke is commanding this to all of us, whether we're Christians or not.

Because the fact of the matter is, whether we're Christians or not, no matter how long you've been a Christian, no one ever knows everything, right? We all don't have perfect knowledge. We all still need to grow in our understanding, to discover new things.

No one has perfect knowledge either. So we don't need to always prove we are right and be defensive, even as Christians.

[15 : 34] Instead, if we approach inquiry the way the Bereans did, then because we trust that God is the God of truth, this truth, His truth, will always rise to the surface, one way or another.

And so when we're being asked questions where we may not understand about the Bible, we don't need to be defensive when questioned or probed. We can be generous and just go, you know what, that's a great question.

I don't know if I have the answer, but let's all try and work it out together and consider what you're saying. And perhaps I could learn a thing or two as well from you and gain a new perspective. But of course, what we also are to do, just as the Bereans did, is to examine everything in the light of Scripture, which is what they did. For the Bereans, the Old Testament was their authoritative text. They knew that to be true and therefore everything was compared against that. For us as Christians, it's the Old and the New Testament that's authoritative. And so we as Christians, we're entitled to check everything and we ought to check everything back against the Bible.

[16 : 46] Now, if there are those of us here who are not Christians, you may have the question that says, well, why do you use the Bible as your authority in the first place?

What makes it the authority against which you want to measure everything against? Well, if you're not a Christian yet, then yes, you're entitled to ask that question and to test the claims of Scripture itself.

And there are a number of ways to do that. But ultimately, the authority of the Bible and the credibility of the Bible rests ultimately around the events of Jesus' life itself because that's the big aim of the Bible to prove that Jesus is the Messiah as Paul was preaching.

And that proof comes in the fact that God raised him from the dead and that what the Old Testament promised came to pass. How might we test this?

Well, we can just read the Bible and just get a sense. Is there internal consistency in everything that the Bible speaks about in terms of the promise and then the fulfillment?

[17 : 55] Does one part of the Bible compared to the other all sort of hang together okay and corroborate each other? This is the way we test the credibility and ultimately the authority of the Bible, which is exactly what the Bereans did.

Paul had come with news, surprising. They had taken it and compared it with the Old Testament and then gone. Does this make sense? Is this consistent?

And so I want to encourage you to do that if you're not a Christian as yet. Or if your friends ask you and you want to share with them, encourage them to do it that way. Another way to consider the credibility of the Bible is to look at the values and the code, the moral laws that are being taught by the Bible.

Does it ring true? You know something? I've never heard anyone, even when they're not a Christian, ever find fault with Jesus and his teachings.

And that's true, isn't it? Many people, it doesn't matter whether they're aces or atheists or another religion, they cannot look at Jesus and what he said or done and find any fault with him.

[19 : 04] For example, everything in the Sermon on the Mount, even if it's too hard for us to attain, is something that everyone agrees makes good sense.

When Jesus teaches about hypocrisy or forgiveness or grace, no one disagrees with that, even if you're not a Christian. That golden rule, do unto others what you would have done to you, that's a universal principle.

That's undisputed. And so I believe that Jesus' own life and teaching and character itself lends weight to the credibility of the Bible and ultimately to the witness of his death and resurrection. But ultimately, we all have to make that judgment ourselves, isn't it? Looking at the Bible and its teachings to work out whether it's true or not. But I want to encourage us to do that with intellectual honesty.

That is, even as we're looking at Scripture, to ask ourselves whether we come to it with an open mind or not. Or do we harbor some hidden motives that may cause us to actually not admit the truth, like jealousy or vested interests or fear of our reputation being undermined or pride that stops us wanting to change our ways.

[20 : 28] or maybe it's the fact that we've already got too much invested in the way we're living. You know, we've spent so many years building up this thing that we call our life and the last thing we want to do is let truth undermine that.

But if we do that, that's really trying to bury our heads in the sand, isn't it? It's sort of saying, you know, I can't, I can't really, I really don't want to know the truth because otherwise this facade or lie that I'm living, I actually have to change.

And you know, believe it or not, we often tend to do that, don't we? That's our natural inclination. Just take the example that sometimes, particularly for men, we're being asked to go and check out some problem without, you know, this or that part or whatever.

And a lot of us guys, we don't want to do it. Doctor says, go take this test. No, we don't want to do it. Why? Because we're afraid of the truth. So we'd rather live as though nothing's wrong with us and then one day discover, oh oh, something's wrong, than to go and find the truth about, yep, I need to lose weight or I need to get my cholesterol down because I've got fat around my liver or whatever the nonsense is.

Then, no, just keep going, isn't it? And that's the same, I think, sometimes with all the other aspects of our lives and when it comes to this issue of the truth about the gospel.

[21 : 54] It may allow us to sleep easily for a while, but that's blissful ignorance, isn't it? And if that's the case, that's a real pity, isn't it? Because we may have bought ourselves some measure of peace in the short term, but we're losing out big time, isn't it, for the long run.

Jesus himself said in Matthew 16, verse 26 on the slide, what good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, to have a good night's sleep every night for the rest of his life even, and yet forfeit their soul?

Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? Jim Elliott, who was martyred trying to share the good news of Jesus to the Indians in Ecuador, he put it another way.

He said, he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. We're not being foolish, are we? If we jettison the lie in order to gain the truth about Jesus, which we cannot lose. If we have the courage and nobility of character to find out the truth, even if it costs us now in terms of material wealth or career progression or friends or whatever it is that we are afraid of losing or giving up, we're not going to lose in the long run, are we?

[23 : 15] Because what we gain is eternal life, true freedom, great riches, becoming part of God's eternal kingdom. And none of that can be taken from us, can it?

If we live according to the truth. And that truth, the Bible says, is believing and trusting that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah.

So I want to end now by praying and then we can go into some questions after the song. But I want to pray both for us and for those we know and love that we will not be afraid of the truth, but instead be like the Bereans, noble in character, willing to examine, find the truth and ultimately live it out.

And so the prayer I'm going to use is based on the psalm that was read earlier, Psalm 24, verse 25, sorry, verse 4 to 5. The psalm read like this, Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths, guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God, my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.

Let's pray. Father, help us not to be afraid of the truth. Show us your ways, Lord, and teach us your paths. Guide us in your truth and teach us, for you are our Savior and our hope is in you all day long.

[24 : 43] Father, for those of us who are afraid, take away our fear and open our minds to be willing to examine the truth that is found in Scripture so that we may see that Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah, the Son of God.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.