**Berea & Searching the Scriptures**

**Acts 17: 10-15 & 2 Tim. 4: 1-5**

**Introduction.**

Did anything strike you as surprising in our first reading about Paul’s time in Berea? What started so promisingly ended as badly as had his time in Thessalonica-flight to the nearest port? Or perhaps the adjective ‘more noble’ applied to his hearers in Berea? At that synagogue, Paul’s usual first stop on arrival in a new town, his listeners were more open minded than the Jews in Thessalonica. To be unprejudiced and fair-minded was assumed at the time to be part of a ‘noble character’ (Acts 17: 11)! They received the message with great eagerness, partly, because they wanted to know more and were attracted by the Gospel of deliverance from Sin’s penalty, but, significantly, because they, also, “examined the Scriptures every day” (v 11) to check on the truth of what Paul had said about the prophecies of the Messiah’s coming being fulfilled in Jesus. Their hearts and minds were engaged in their reception of the Gospel, so many Jews accepted it.

But what about the prominent Greeks i.e. non Jews “many prominent men and some women” (v 12)? People in the Ancient World were hag ridden with fears of demons and evil spirits that had to be placated at every turn with gifts, charms and lucky spells for safety!. Similar to today, when many think wealth, fame or family life will make them secure. The Greek Gods were an unruly, vicious, vengeful and immoral lot, whose response to humans seemed to be utterly capricious, if the legends were to be believed. So no help there! It’s no surprise that, like nowadays, many thoughtful people, yearning, idealistically, to be rid of selfishness and to be better human beings, discovered self-help in contemporary philosophies like Stoicism unsatisfactory, but found solace in Judaism’s moral code and compassionate God. Hence, “the God-fearing Greeks” (v 4) or the centurion, Cornelius, in Acts 10. They, like many now, were attracted by Paul’s message of a personal Saviour, Jesus Christ, who had overcome death and the forces of evil by His Cross and Resurrection.

To continue the narrative-the Jews from Thessalonica, on hearing Paul was preaching the word of God in Berea rushed along the 60 miles of road to repeat their success in ‘agitating the crowd and stirring them up.’ (v 13). The ‘brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast’ (v 14), where he and his escorts took ship to Athens, so as to remove a major irritant. Timothy and Silas stayed on in Berea to help the new believers in their faith. Thus, the Lord had used the ultimately hostile responses in Thessalonica and Berea for good in that new groups of believers had been set up in two key transit towns on the vital Via Egnatia, while Paul in going to Athens could speak in the intellectual capital of the ancient world. This tells us something of God’s providence and His working ‘in mysterious ways His wonders to perform.’

Paul’s experiences in Berea highlight one other major point-the importance of the Scriptures in explaining and following the Christian way a key factor in the ‘Job Description’, as it were, of the Christian preacher or minister from 2 Tim. 4: 1-5, which Paul exemplified at Berea.

**The Scriptures.**

1. Firstly, they need to be preached faithfully, so that the hearers will find the Truth-in the sense of a Person, for Jesus called himself “the Way, the Truth and the Life.” Jn. 14:6. This close personal relationship with the Friend of Sinners that Paul offered really spoke to a deeply felt need from that time onward. As I’ve said before, the realisation, during my National Service, that Jesus Christ was not a remote, lofty and holy figure but a person, whom I could know and converse with as my Saviour and Friend was amazing-almost a shock and wonderful liberation. Jesus said “These are the Scriptures that testify about Me.” Jn. 5: 39. Like the Bereans I discovered this to be true.
2. The Scriptures are the truth in the sense that they reveal God’s character bit by bit throughout the Old Testament and, especially, in the prophets. They show God wants to heal the breach between Himself and sinful disobedient humankind starting with the Fall in Eden. This needed the Suffering Servant, on whom “the Lord has laid…the iniquity of us all.” Is. 53: 6.-the Messiah, assumed by many Jews to be a military deliverer from the hated Roman occupation. It was these prophecies in the Scriptures which the Bereans ‘examined… daily to see if what Paul said was true.’(v11) He was a learned rabbi, who knew the Scriptures minutely, so with the help of the Holy Spirit he could see all the references to and prophecies about the Lord Jesus Christ. Many Bereans accepted these, but others rejected them.
3. The Scriptures, also, help us in our walk with Jesus or living the Christian life. In 2 Tim. 4: 2 Paul solemnly urges Timothy to preach the Word meaning the Scriptures to ‘correct, rebuke and encourage’ his hearers, though this may sound heavy.  
   1. correction-believers then, like us, may need correcting, for they and we can stray from the sound doctrine. Perhaps, ‘itching ears want to hear’ (v 3) something different, easier or less challenging about their or our behaviour or matters of belief. Many would say we’re seeing the same now over human sexuality or political correctness!
   2. rebuke-occasionally, we may need a straight rebuke from Scripture. I remember once when getting worked up in the Common Room about some issue in school politics, a Christian friend reminded me “Since you have been raised with Christ, set your heart on things above”. Col. 3: 1. This helped me to feel less cross and put the whole thing in perspective! Or the reminder ”If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.” Ps 66: 18. How often do we need this-speaking for myself!
   3. encouragement-so essential for us! Sometimes the Holy Spirit makes a particular phrase in Scripture light up for us to encourage us in a dark or difficult moment. Once, I was reflecting, many years afterwards, on a difficult moment in my teaching career, when events and people had seemed to be conspiring to make life very hard. I could feel bitterness, even in retrospect, welling up. We were looking at the life of Joseph, who told his brothers ”You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish the saving of many lives.” (Gen. 50:20) when famine struck. This shone a wonderful new healing light on that troubling experience.
4. What does the example of the Bereans and the advice given to Timothy about the Scriptures tell us? They examined the Scriptures daily. Clearly, it was not the occasional dip into a favourite passage-there was regularity in their approach which speaks to us. I imagine their format was to study the prophecies about the Messiah, which they needed to check on after listening to Paul. Only then would they be sure that Jesus was really the Messiah and Deliverer they had been anticipating for years. In the same way, we need some kind of format for consistent study and reflection on the message of the Scriptures. You may have heard of the Scripture Union series of guides-Encounter with God or Daily Bread or the Bible Reading Fellowship Notes. Whatever we choose, the notes will help each one of us to ‘examine the Scriptures daily’. Another picture of the Scriptures is that of nourishment-“sweeter than honey” Ps 19: 10 or milk-Paul gave the Corinthian believers “milk not solid food, for you were not ready for it.” 1 Cor. 3: 2. We need this food for our souls to grow, to help forward the work in progress of being transformed, however slowly, into the likeness of Jesus Christ.
5. Finally, “All Scripture is God breathed “,as Paul wrote in 2 Tim. 3: 16. “It is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates even to dividing the soul and spirit…it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” (Heb. 4: 12). It would reveal the Lord Jesus to some, clear up their uncertainties and challenge their confusions, so that the message would be ‘received with great eagerness’ (Acts 17: 11). At the same time, it would offend some, “as it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” (Heb. 4: 12)-who likes that? It would be rejected and could lead to physical danger-hence the need for great patience, for keeping “ your heard in all situations” and for the endurance “of hardship.” (2 Tim. 4: 5.)

**To Conclude.**

What should we take away from Paul’s visit to Berea? Firstly, as Paul Mileham said last week we should be sowing the seed of the Gospel, in however modest a way. What a challenge! As we emerge from the hibernation of lockdown, perhaps, we’re tentatively or warily girding up our loins to interact with people! Let us pray for God’s help in this!

Secondly, we should, also, try to read the Scriptures regularly-to examine what the Lord is wanting to tell us by way of encouragement or correction. The Scriptures, especially “His very great and precious promises.” (2 Pet. 1:4.) to be claimed, can as nourishment strengthen our faith, for the days ahead. To put in another way-in Scripture we see and hear the Lord Jesus speaking to us, like He did to Moses, “face to face as a man speaks with his friend.” (Ex. 33: 11). Thus, our friendship with Him is deepened.