

The Berean Example

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Sitting nestled on the eastern slope of the Olympian mountain range, at the foot of Mount Bermius in Greece, is the city of Verria or Kara-Verria. A few insignificant ruins from the Greek and Roman periods are scattered throughout the vicinity. Today, thirty thousand people live in this ancient city, through which streams of water flow along its streets. Water has had a prevalent influence on the town because of its abundance. In fact, the city's ancient name is thought to be derived from this very factor.

Most of us would probably recognize this city by a much different name than its modern one. The Bible mentions its name only a few times, but we tend to remember it for the attitude of its people, who, during the ministry of the apostle Paul, were real students of God's Word and His way of life. Anciently, the town's name was Bercea, or as is better known, Berea.

Acts 17:10-13 and Acts 20:4 are the only places that mention the city of Berea, and the latter reference merely associates Sopater, one of Paul's companions, with the city. As any biblical student knows, it is the Berean's approach to the Scripture and their response to it that makes them an interesting study.

A Special People

Just who were the Bereans, and what makes them special enough to consider them as notable disciples of the truth of God? Acts 17:10-13 tells their story:

Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. Therefore many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men. But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was preached by Paul at Berea, they came there also and stirred up the crowds.

Berea lies within the ancient region of Macedonia. Scripture confirms that a Jewish community—large enough to have built a synagogue—lived within the city, even though it was within a Gentile nation. On his second "missionary" journey, following the council in Jerusalem, the apostle Paul came to Berea to preach, after proclaiming the gospel in places like Philippi and Thessalonica.

What is it, though, that made the Bereans so special? Commentator Matthew Henry writes, regarding the Bereans:

They had a freer thought, and lay more open to conviction, were willing to hear reason, and admit the force of it, and to subscribe to that which appeared to them to be truth, though it was contrary to their former sentiments. This was more noble.

They had a better temper, were not so sour, and morose, and ill conditioned towards all that were not of their mind. As they were ready to come into a unity with those that by the power of truth they were brought to concur with, so they continued in charity with those that they saw cause to differ from. This was more noble. They neither prejudged the cause, nor were moved with envy at the managers of it, as the Jews at Thessalonica were, but very generously gave both it and them a fair hearing, without passion or partiality. (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 2141)

We first see that they were more fair-minded (*noble*, KJV) than the Jews of Thessalonica. What does it mean to be fair-minded or noble? The Greek word used in Acts is *eugenesteroi*, which comes from *eugenes*, from which we derive the personal name "Eugene." Originally, it meant "wellborn" and implied nobility. Later, it described those of a generous spirit, who are open-minded toward truth, not prejudiced, hostile, or suspicious of others, but give others a fair hearing. The Bereans are considered as noble because they listened to the preaching of the gospel with open hearts as they pursued God and His whole truth.

We also see that they received the Word with "readiness" or eagerness. The Greek word, *prothumos*, suggests that they looked into the Scriptures with enthusiasm, eagerness, and zeal. The Greek paints a word-picture of a ravenously hungry man who devours the food set before him or an extremely thirsty man who is finally given something to drink. The Bereans were full of enthusiasm, readiness, and zeal for God's Word.

Searching the Scriptures Daily

The Bereans searched the Scriptures to see if what they were being taught was correct. We need to remember that the only Scripture available to them was the Old Testament. The things that Paul and Silas taught them were regarding Jesus Christ and the New Covenant, mentioned in the Old Testament. Most of these people were of Jewish heritage and knew of the Old Testament promises of a Messiah.

How exactly did they search the Scriptures and prove this "new" information? *Searched* comes from the Greek word *anakrino*, which translates as "properly, to scrutinize, i.e. (by implication) investigate, interrogate, determine." The King James Version translates the word variously as "ask, question, discern, examine, judge, search."

This does not mean that the Bereans constantly questioned the Scriptures to prove or disprove what they were learning. However, they had access to the Old Testament, the Bible of their time. They could examine the words Paul and Silas spoke and determine if they were indeed in line with the Old Testament teaching. They could also observe the manner that these men conducted their lives. How these men taught the Word of God and the proofs they gave were quite relevant to the Bereans.

Does this mean that they had to disprove or reprove things such as the Sabbath or the holy days, which they knew to be of God? Absolutely not! But it clearly indicates that they were not going to let old thoughts, ideas, or ways easily fall by the wayside, nor would they close the door on any truth that might come to them through revelation or by teaching. It also made them aware of the need to establish and re-establish the truth of God among them on an on-going fashion.

As a small Jewish community among the Gentiles, they probably needed the added security of what they were learning and living to be a bulwark against the corrupt world around them. They kept close to God's Word, scrutinizing it for every bit of help it could give them to remain true to God's way amidst a pagan culture. Each of us should readily relate to this as we strive to survive the corruption of this world and Satan's ploys.

In addition, the Bereans studied God's Word on a daily basis. Why is this important? When we see instances of contact with God in the Bible, it often has a daily application. Why does God require the Israelites to collect manna each day (except on the Sabbath, for which they prepared by collecting a double portion on Friday), except to remind them of His constant providence? Why does Christ leave us the example of the "model prayer," in which we are to thank God for our physical and spiritual food each day? This daily spiritual exercise had to help the Bereans to feed on, dwell on, delight in, and think upon what was true, lovely, praiseworthy, and excellent rather than the negativity that their world often embraced. Their lives and minds were continually on the things and ways of God.

Personal Examples

Luke, the author of Acts, specifically notes that "non-Jews" or Gentiles came to believe in the same truths. It may be that these Gentiles converted through the personal examples of Paul, Silas, Timothy, and the early converts among the Jewish Bereans. Luke labels these Gentiles as "prominent" or honorable men and women. They may have been wealthy and well-respected members of the community, people who had all the creature comforts they might need.

Nevertheless, because of the truth that Paul preaches as well as the personal examples of the brethren, they believed. We can imagine that the personal lives of the Bereans—so careful in their study and defense of God's Word—must have set a wonderful example to people that Christ said would have a hard time accepting the truth (Matthew 19:24), if they were indeed among the wealthy.

Another interesting fact comes from *Hitchcock's Bible Name Dictionary*, which mentions that the name "Berea" represents something that is heavy or weighty. Even the city's name hints at a vastly different nature than that described in Matthew 23:23, where Christ condemns the Pharisees for neglecting the weightier matters of God's law. The Berean's example was a balanced one in that they separated themselves from the world around them yet still influenced the conversion of others. The Pharisees' strictness, while perhaps technically correct, lacked the love and concern that the Bereans embraced as a way of life toward God and others.

The people of Berea certainly placed great importance on their belief system, but also strived to see the balance of things so that even those of other cultures and religions could see the fruit produced in their lives. Hypocrisy does not seem to be a problem that hindered this faithful but open-minded people.

The Bereans were a unique people with a strong desire to follow God's truth. They combined genuine character with zeal to lead and live by example and by the whole Word of God. Their search for the truth did not rely just on the accepted sources of their time but also on the words and actions of those shown to be credible leaders of God's people. Once this was evident, their lives became living examples that others around them could emulate. Their lives began to show fruitful "works" that centered on God and His truth.

Streams of Living Waters

A final intriguing factor unique to the city of Berea is that it was known for the many streams of water that flow through it. As we know, water symbolizes several Christian ideas, among them baptism and the Holy Spirit being most recognized. Water is critical to the survival of a town and its inhabitants, just as the Holy Spirit is to those within the body of Christ.

In John 4:10-14, Christ speaks of this to the Samaritan woman at the well. He tells her of the living waters, His Holy Spirit, that would soon become a part of a person's life if he believed. Once converted, God's elect soon understood this living water to be as important to spiritual survival as drinking water is to physical survival. Jesus says, "Whoever drinks of this water [from Jacob's well (verse 6)] will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life" (verses 13-14).

Not only Berea's name but also the city's physical attributes have spiritual connotations. That the city is well watered symbolizes the relationship between the Berean's faith and flow of God's Holy Spirit through their lives on a daily basis. This, too, should be a good reminder to us to partake of a daily diet of God's Holy Spirit through study, meditation, and prayer.

A Stark Contrast

The Bereans stand in stark contrast to the Jews of Thessalonica, who were far more obstinate and not nearly as fair-minded. Though both groups had a similar background, they obviously had different intents and goals (compare Acts 17:5-8, 13 with verses 10-12, 14). The Bereans were willing to be shown a much different and better way of life than the close-minded ways that had become the norm under the rule and influence of the prevalent Pharisaical Judaism.

The next time the Bereans come to mind, we need to remember that these few verses are a reminder for us. It may be a good idea to compare our conversion to that of the Bereans. Did we approach God's truth with their zeal and fair-mindedness? Do we do that even now? Do we yearn to know God and His truth in a greater, more personal way? Are we willing to take the time to investigate, examine, and scrutinize the Scripture to find the truth?

Like the Bereans, we live in a world that is corrupt, but we can remain clean by bathing in the truth that God continues to reveal to His chosen people. All we must do is to partake of the daily diet of the food (God's Word) and water (His Holy Spirit) that God so richly provides in our search for the guidelines to following His will.