

# Truth Checking

Acts 17:1-15 on July 25, 2021

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*Please read Acts 17:1-15 before going further in this transcript.*

This morning's message is on "Truth Checking." To get us warmed up, let's play a quick game of "2 Truths & a Lie." If you're not familiar with this game, the idea is to see just how well we really know each other. So each person comes up with 2 truths about themselves, and one lie about themselves. Then, the rest of us try to decipher which is which. So, let's see just how well we know some of our Church Staff. Let's start with the Lead Pastor, Jerry Johnson. *Two of these are true, one is false. AFTER you make your guesses, see the footnotes below.*

I've never gotten a speeding ticket.

I've taken 7 trips to Mexico.

I once pole vaulted 12 feet high.<sup>1</sup>

Now let's try our Associate Pastor, Eric Nygren:

He's never broken a bone.

He's lived in Ohio, Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota.

He never went to 2nd grade.<sup>2</sup>

Last one, how about our Office Manager, Kate Toriseva:

She got stuck on set during the filming of Men in Black 3.

She is terrified of pigs.

The first deer she shot was a six-point buck.<sup>3</sup>

Here's the point of this opening illustration: How well do we really know someone else? And how do we determine if or when someone is really telling us the truth? As Paul traveled all around the world, proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, how did people know that this traveling evangelist was actually telling them the truth, and not a lie?

Please turn in your Bible to Acts 17:1. We're now about a third of the way into Paul's 2<sup>nd</sup> Missionary Journey. At this point in the journey, he and his companions are traveling over land, along what's called the "Egnatian Way."<sup>4</sup> Acts 17:1 begins, "When Paul and his companions had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue." So we've now traveled from Philippi to Thessalonica. Paul will not only successfully share the gospel here, but he will also successfully help plant and establish a local church here. In fact, Paul becomes SO connected with the Thessalonian Church, that he will end up writing two of his New Testament letters to them: 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians.<sup>5 6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The lie is that Jerry's maximum pole vaulting height was only 11 feet.

<sup>2</sup> The lie is that Eric has never lived in Wisconsin.

<sup>3</sup> The lie is that Kate's first deer was a yearling fawn. But she did drop it in its tracks!

<sup>4</sup> We're not told if it's all on foot or if they had animals to ride on. So they are probably traveling somewhere between 15-30 miles per day. See *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2255 footnote on Acts 17:10 and *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1860 footnote on Acts 17:1.

<sup>5</sup> *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2254 footnote on Acts 17:1-9.

<sup>6</sup> If you'd like a closer glimpse into the faith of these Thessalonian believers and their intimate relationship with Paul, read 1st/2nd Thessalonians.

Acts 17:2-3 continues, “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.” When Paul arrives in Thessalonica, he goes straight to the Jewish synagogue and begins teaching “from the Scriptures.” These “Scriptures” are a reference to the OT Scriptures. Many of the New Testament books of the Bible hadn’t even been written yet, including 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians. The important thing to recognize here, is that Paul was not just speaking with mere rhetorical device or empty motivational fervor. He was not merely peddling his own opinions in order to help him sell his new book. Paul’s foundation for reasoning with these Thessalonian Jews, was the Scriptures: God’s Holy Word. And this is why the Jews agreed to even listen to Paul. They didn’t need to play “2 truths and a lie” with him, because he was teaching them right out of the Scriptures. Scriptures which these Jews knew and were familiar with, and most importantly, respected as AUTHORITATIVE.<sup>7</sup> Verse 3 clarifies that he was “explaining and proving” a particular truth about God’s Messiah: Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead.” The only way humankind can be made right with God, and forgiven for their sin, was through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This wasn’t a new idea, but it was a new understanding for many of these Thessalonian Jews. You see, many of the Jews at this time in history, had still not picked up on this idea of a “Suffering Servant.” In fact, even though this idea of the Messiah suffering and dying for our sin, is VERY familiar to most of us reading this sermon today, to many 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews, this was a RADICAL shift in their theological understanding. In other words, there were many 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews who believed that Jesus couldn’t POSSIBLY be God’s chosen Messiah, because of the very fact that He’d suffered and died. And so, one of Luke’s key purposes in recording this in his Gospel, and throughout the book of Acts, was to keep a clear historical record of this VITAL biblical teaching.<sup>8</sup> The fact is, BOTH Jesus and Paul, as well as many other gospel witnesses in the Early Church, were all in alignment with this one, same gospel message: “Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead.”<sup>9 10</sup> This has been God’s master Redemptive Plan from the very beginning.<sup>11</sup> Paul explains this to these Jews from the OT Scriptures.

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<sup>7</sup> Also consider 1 Thessalonians 2:3-6, and 13.

<sup>8</sup> See *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2254 footnote on Acts 17:3.

<sup>9</sup> See Acts 3:18 and 26:23 as well as Luke 24:25-27, 44-46.

<sup>10</sup> Paul’s message to the Thessalonians is actually remarkably similar to Jesus’ words in Luke 24:46. Luke 24:44-47 records, “[Jesus] said to them, ‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.’ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. [i.e. the Old Testament.] He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” In other words, Paul was teaching people the same thing that Jesus had taught His disciples, that His suffering, death, and resurrection “were foreseen and foreshadowed in the OT Scriptures.” *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1755 footnote on Luke 24:44.

<sup>11</sup> See Ephesians 1:3-10.

Acts 17:4 tells us, “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.” This phrase, “quite a few prominent women” shows up again in a similar way in Berea in verse 12, “a number of prominent Greek women.” We also encountered this back in Acts 16, when we met Lydia, who was “a dealer in purple cloth.” Purple cloth was “a luxury item”<sup>12</sup> at this time in history, so Lydia worked “in fine cloths for the wealthy.”<sup>13</sup> This indicates her own wealth, as well as her prominence as an influential businesswoman in the community.<sup>14</sup> There were actually MANY prominent women in the New Testament, who made significant investments in the spread of the gospel.<sup>15</sup> The fact is, women often played KEY roles in Paul’s work, not just financially, but in many hardworking ways as well.<sup>16</sup> We’ll see this more and more as we progress through the book of Acts. These prominent women coming to faith, may explain at least part of the reason, why we find jealousy mentioned in the very next verse...

Acts 17:5 says, “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 rushed to Jason’s house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, Christianity was attracting all kinds of people to Jesus, and with them, came some of the wealthier constituents. Many of these prominent, wealthy people would now be directing their financial resources towards the local church and the gospel, rather than toward the local Jewish synagogue.<sup>18</sup> Jealousy is SUCH an interesting response to Paul’s presentation of the gospel. Luke doesn’t report that they even tried to refute his message, or that they took Paul to task on his particular interpretation of the OT Scriptures, or anything else like that. What we learn is that they were jealous! Jealous that Paul was convincing SO many people with his message, and not only so many people, but also so many different kinds of people, some of them their fellow Jews, but also a LARGE number of Greeks, both men and women, quite a few of them prominent women in the community. This jealousy had nothing to do with right or wrong theology, or concern that Paul might be leading people astray with false teaching. It was just plain old, human jealousy. For Paul’s part, his goal wasn’t to make

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<sup>12</sup> *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2253 footnote on Acts 16:11-15.

<sup>13</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 534.

<sup>14</sup> And we’re reasonably certain that Lydia had “significant means since she owned a home large enough to accommodate the missionaries [when they visited Philippi in Acts 16:15] and presumably to host a house church [in Philippi in Acts 16:40].” *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2253 footnote on Acts 16:11-15.

<sup>15</sup> See Acts 17:4, 12, 34; 18:2; and Romans 16:1-15 which lists Paul’s personal greetings to his fellow believers and ministry partners, many of whom are hardworking women.

<sup>16</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 534.

<sup>17</sup> My imagination runs a little wild when I read this phrase, “rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace.” For some reason, I always picture one of those low-budget, old-school Kungfu movies. You know, something like “Enter the Fist of the Dragon” or something like that. One of those movies where there always seems to be at least one big, bad dude with a patch over one eye. Everything is in a foreign language with subtitles or English overdubs, and this mob of warriors attacks the good guy. In fact, you might call it the original “flash mob” where everyone in the market suddenly turns toward the camera. They take out their nun chucks and throwing stars, and then attack the good guy, who always seems to be standing right in the middle of the street. Well, that’s probably NOTHING like what happened in Thessalonica! Be that as it may, a mob rushes out to find Paul and Silas.

<sup>18</sup> See *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2254-2255 footnotes on Acts 17:4, 5.

them jealous, it was to faithfully preach the gospel which he'd been commissioned to preach.

A mob then rushes out to find Paul and Silas. Instead, they end up finding a guy named Jason and they take out their frustrations on him. These jealous Jews top it off, by making an accusation of treason. In Acts 17:6-7 they SHOUT, "...These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus."<sup>19</sup> Now, truth be told, Christ-followers in the Early Church did their very best to honor Caesar's decrees, and to live at peace with everyone in their society.<sup>20</sup> In fact, "fully devoted followers of Jesus" should be some of the best citizens in our entire nation, some of the best assets for any town or city.<sup>21 22</sup> So, while they were indeed teaching, that Jesus is the King of all kings, and the prophesied Messiah, descended from David's throne, it's highly unlikely that they were "defying Caesar's decrees." Unless of course, any of those decrees were directly opposed to obeying Jesus.

Well, the city is now in a HUGE uproar, so they make Jason, and the others with him, post bond before they let them go. Acts 17:10 says, "As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea...."<sup>23 24 25</sup> Once they are in Berea, Acts 17:11 tells us, "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." The Bereans were praised for "more noble character" for 2 reasons. First of all...

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<sup>19</sup> Acts 17:6 and 17:8 both make it clear that they make this accusation to the "city officials." Here's an interesting little nugget of information about this: "The Greek term [for "city officials"] politarches was unknown in Greek literature outside of Acts until it was discovered in 1835 on an inscription in Thessalonica. The use of the title here is evidence of Luke's scrupulous attention to historical detail." (*The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2255 footnotes on Acts 17:8.) In other words, before 1835, someone might have argued that Luke was using a Greek term that was incorrect or inaccurate. However, archaeology has now underscored once again, the historical accuracy and trustworthiness of God's written word. (In fact, if you want to see the evidence with your own eyes, the block of stone with this inscription on it, is sitting in the British Museum in London. *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1860 footnote on Acts 17:6.)

<sup>20</sup> See Romans 12:17-18 and Hebrews 12:14.

<sup>21</sup> See Matthew 5:16, 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12, and 1 Peter 2:12.

<sup>22</sup> 1 Peter 2:13-17 lays it out this way: "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor."

<sup>23</sup> I'm curious about how they traveled at night, probably with lanterns I suppose?

<sup>24</sup> It was 50 miles from Thessalonica to Berea. *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1861 footnote on Acts 17:10.

<sup>25</sup> Paul and Silas may have been sent away for their own safety, but they also may have been sent away for the sake of Jason and the others who'd posted bond. One author notes: "Jason was forced to guarantee a peaceful, quiet community, or he would face the confiscation of his properties and perhaps even death." (*The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1860 footnote on Acts 17:9.) In other words, their financial livelihood was placed at risk.

**1) They received the message with great eagerness.** Rather than responding with jealousy or a concern for their own financial interests, they responded with “great eagerness.” This begs the question for us today: are we EAGER to receive messages from God’s Word? Or, is our response a little more subdued? Have we become accustomed to just “putting in our time” reading the message from Sunday morning, as a necessary obligation? In this month’s Vision 2024 Prayer Letter, I urged us to pray 1 Peter 2:2 for our Church Family, “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.” Brother or Sister in Christ, we need more than just “good speeches” or clever illustrations. We need the pure milk of God’s Word. Let’s pray that God will continue to stir up a great eagerness within us, a spiritual hunger for messages from His Holy Word.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> reason the Bereans were praised for “more noble character” is that...

**2) They examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.** In other words, just like in Thessalonica, Paul was reasoning with them “FROM the Scriptures.” But, in contrast to the Thessalonian Jews, the Berean Jews showed more noble character by doing some genuine “truth checking” of their own. They responded to Paul’s message in a mature way, by honestly evaluating the facts. Rather than just taking him at his word, or being impressed by his credentials or his rhetorical flair, they checked Paul’s words, against God’s Words.<sup>26</sup> Brother or Sister in Christ, we dare not become SATISFIED, with messages that aren’t from God’s Word! This is one of the benefits of being in a **Life Group**. It’s not that we don’t trust our pastors to preach God’s Word accurately, but rather that it’s commendable for Christ-followers to examine God’s Word together. This not only helps us validate that it’s been rightly preached, but also that it’s being rightly understood and rightly applied to our lives. “Truth Checking” is a way of honoring God, and guarding against false teaching, while at the same time building one another up in the faith.

One author notes a key detail here that I have to admit, I might have completely missed: “While believers today often use this example to encourage fellow believers to read their Bibles as ‘Bereans,’ the CONTEXT here concerns unbelieving Jews who are willing to give Paul’s message a legitimate hearing and test his words against the Hebrew Scriptures.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, the picture here is actually of non-Christians “Truth Checking” Christians. These Berean Jews, who were not yet believers in Jesus Christ, were “Truth Checking” the message of this Christ-follower named Paul, to see if he was being Biblically accurate. This should make us ask ourselves, if our non-Christian neighbors in Bemidji, were ever to match our message and our beliefs, up against actual Scripture, would our message hold up? Or... would they find that our message and our beliefs are NOT really all that Christian after all, or NOT really very biblical after all, but rather mostly just our own ideas and ideologies. Perhaps what we

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<sup>26</sup> Can we agree, that at E-Free Bemidji, we won’t just take some person’s word for it? Let’s agree to be “a people of the Book.” Whether I’m preaching, or Pastor Eric is preaching, or whether we have a guest speaker, let’s hold every word that is preached from this pulpit to the standard of God’s Word.

<sup>27</sup> *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2255 footnotes on Acts 17:10-15.

believe, and what we're teaching others to believe, are just our own opinions or our own agendas, presented through our own particular lens, but lacking any real power or connection to the genuine teaching of Scripture.<sup>28</sup> Hebrews 4:12 tells us, "For **the word of God** [NOT "the word of Jerry" or "the word of Pastor Eric] **is alive and active.** [The word of God is...] Sharper than any double-edged sword, [the word of God] penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; [the word of God] judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." In order for us to live out and share God's Word with others accurately, we need to know it well. We need to study it DAILY, and let it mold and shape us. We need to let it tear down our own preconceived notions and personal opinions, our own ideas and agendas, our own factions and politics and racial biases. We need to pray that the Holy Spirit will help us to see His truth clearly, through all the fog of popular culture, various new agencies, and the myriad of conspiracy theories.<sup>29</sup> To put it another way, if someone presented us with "2 truths and a lie" from Scripture, we need to know our Bibles well enough, that we could discern which is which, without hesitation.

Well, as a result of Paul rightly teaching "from the Scriptures," and upon verification by these unbelieving Berean Jews, verse 12 reports that "MANY of them believed." Praise the Lord! Unfortunately however, by this time, the news of Paul's preaching in Berea had traveled all the way back the 50 miles to Thessalonica. When the Thessalonian Jews hear about this, they come to Berea and stir up the crowds there. And then the believers in Berea, help Paul get to Athens, which is where we'll pick up the story next week.<sup>30 31</sup>

Let's wrap up today by considering where we stand on the authority of the Bible in our own lives. Article 2 of our church's SOF summarizes our beliefs about "The Bible" this way:

"We believe that God has spoken in the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, through the words of human authors. As the verbally inspired Word of God, the Bible is without error in the original writings, the complete revelation of His will for salvation, and **the ultimate authority** by which every realm of human knowledge and endeavor should be judged. Therefore, it is to be **believed in all that it teaches, obeyed in all that it requires, and trusted in all that it promises.**"<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Consider God's question "is not MY WORD like fire?" in Jeremiah 23:28-29.

<sup>29</sup> Consider Psalm 19:7-11 and Psalm 119:1-176.

<sup>30</sup> Paul was escorted the entire way to Athens, roughly 200+ miles. Timothy and Silas eventually join Paul in Athens, but "from there Paul sends Timothy back to check on the church at Thessalonica." *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2256 footnotes on Acts 17:14-15.

<sup>31</sup> You see, Paul had wanted to spend more time there but the believers there were concerned about the agitated crowds. Paul's heart was still back in Thessalonica in many ways. In fact, we learn in 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2, that Paul will later send Timothy back to the Thessalonian church to see how they are doing, "So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith."

<sup>32</sup> Our Statement of Faith very intentionally begins with God Himself for its Article 1, since He is the origin of the written Word of God. "God - We believe in one God, Creator of all things, holy, infinitely perfect, and eternally existing in a loving unity of three equally divine Persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Having limitless knowledge and sovereign power, God has graciously purposed from eternity to redeem a people for Himself and to make all things new for His own glory."

Do we consider our Bible “the ULTIMATE authority”?

Do we BELIEVE “in all that it teaches”?

Do we strive to OBEY “all that it requires”?

Do we TRUST God’s Word “in all that it promises”?

The Bereans sure did! Even the unbelieving Berean Jews were able to recognize the implicit authority of God’s written, Holy Word. Brother or Sister in Christ, are WE convinced of the Scriptures the way the Bereans were? If we are convinced in the authority of God’s Word, then let’s read it and study it carefully. Let’s make sure that God’s Word is our primary authoritative source when we’re making decisions in this life. Let’s apply God’s Word to all of our daily Truth Checking. And, let’s live according to God’s Word in such a way, that every nonbeliever who meets us, will see that our lives match up, with the teaching of God’s Word.