



Empty Heads or Noble Minds

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

I've always been intrigued by the Wise Men. It's only in Matthew's gospel that we meet this little band of travelers who seem to materialize out of nowhere. We don't know a whole lot about these guys. The old song, "We Three Kings of Orient Are" may be wrong on several counts. There's no evidence that there were three of them, only that they brought three kinds of gifts. We don't even know they were from the Orient. Matthew just says they were from the east. What we do know is that they followed a star as far as Jerusalem on a hunch that that star signaled the birth of a Jewish king. They began to ask around about where this new King might be and word got around and people began to talk about what this meant. King Herod, of course, was threatened by talk of a new King. If this were true, he wanted to know where he was. So he got the scholars together to do some research as to where a King like that would be born. They found the answer in this little scrap of Scripture torn from the pages of Micah's prophecy: "**But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity**" (Micah 5:2). That's all they needed. Bethlehem's the place to be. And the rest is history.

What strikes me about this story is the star could only take them so far. They needed something more if they were going to find this newborn King. What did they need? They needed the Scriptures. They needed for someone to dig into the Scriptures and see if any nugget could be found to point them to the birthplace of the King. If they didn't search the Scripture they never would have found Jesus.

I want you to try to place yourself in that story for a moment. If you were a citizen of Jerusalem in those days, and you heard about the birth of the Messiah, would you know how to find him? Where would you look for that kind of information? Would you be able to pick up your Bible and dig for answers? Would you be able to find your way around that ancient book? Or would you have to rely on the scholars for your answers? And what if they got it wrong? How would you know? We can excuse the Wise Men for not knowing, but Herod? The people of Jerusalem? Why weren't they able to look for themselves?

This morning we're looking at a story from Acts 17 that challenges us to be better students of the Scriptures. It's a story that teaches us not to believe just anything we hear, but to examine everything in light of the Scripture. You see, like the Wise Men, without the Scripture we'll not find Jesus and we'll miss Christmas!

We last left Paul in Philippi. Now he, Silas and Timothy travel southwest along the Egnatian Way and come to Thessalonica. Luke says in v.1. "**Now when they**

had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews." Luke is not using the first person any longer because he was left in Philippi to help the new church there. It almost sounds as if this was a day's walk, but this was a journey of 100 miles, taking at least three days to complete. Paul wanted to get to Thessalonica because it was such an influential city and he knew that the entire region could be touched through a church there. Travelers from Rome to Asia would have to go right through Thessalonica. And it's located on the seacoast, and so it was a large center of trade.

I. Paul's method was to reason from the Scriptures.

A. He went first to the synagogue for three Sabbaths: Paul and his friends arrive there and the first thing they do is find a synagogue. Paul's method was always to start with the Jews. Look what happens. "**And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ'**" (vv. 2-3). Paul begins by opening the Scriptures to them. Of course, they already had a high regard for these sacred writings, what we know of as Old Testament. Luke says that Paul "reasoned with them from the Scriptures." Now here is something a bit different than we've seen before. We're used to seeing Paul preach the gospel, but here he takes a different approach. He reasons with them. The sense of the word here is that he dialogued with them, asking and answering questions for three Sabbaths.

B. He explained and proved that the Messiah must suffer and rise: And there seems to have been a couple of things he focused on as he did this. First, he explained and gave evidence that the Christ (the Messiah) had to suffer and rise again. At this point he wasn't saying anything about Jesus. He was simply showing from the OT how the Messiah had to suffer and die. That was a major problem that the Jews had with Jesus. They had no concept of a suffering Messiah. So Paul had to show them that they had totally missed that in their reading of the OT. It was there all along, but they missed it. They were blind. He would have taken them back to Is. 53:5-6, "**He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.**" That passage must have rocked their world! And perhaps he used Psalm 22, which opens with the words of Jesus from

the cross: **"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"** (Ps. 22:1) Then he must have brought in the resurrection passages, like Psalm 16:10, **"For you will not allow your Holy One to undergo decay."** I can see Paul, carefully laying out these predictions, building his case.

C. He proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah: Once he had done that, then the second step was to show how in the life of Jesus of Nazareth these things were perfectly fulfilled. One by one he would have laid out the prediction side by side with the fulfillment. Perhaps he started with the virgin birth, predicted by Isaiah, and then Bethlehem, and then the stay in Egypt. It was all there! Someone has estimated that Jesus fulfilled over 400 OT prophecies. Finally, after laying it all out over the course of three weeks, Paul would have said, "Don't you see? This Jesus I've been talking about is the Messiah!"

II. In Thessalonica the response was mixed.

A. There were those who were persuaded: Luke goes on and tells us about how people there responded. Look at v.4. **"And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women."** When he says "some of them were persuaded" he's referring to the Jews. They were the toughest nut to crack. Religious people are always toughest. They're the ones most set in their ways, most prejudiced, most hardheaded, because they think they know it all. He reached only a few of those. But there was a large group of Greeks, who had come to the synagogue hoping to hear the truth about the Living God. They'd been attracted by the Jewish Scriptures. As they heard the gospel, they were impressed, and many believed.

Among them was a group of the leading women of the city. It seems the gospel had a particular appeal to women, especially to women of the upper classes. There's a reason for that. These were educated women who were instructed in the philosophies of Greece. But they had found these to be empty, offering nothing for the heart, nothing to meet their deepest needs. Not only that, they degraded women and left them feeling disrespected and undervalued. So they had turned to Judaism for answers, but in Judaism they were burdened with cumbersome regulations which again left them empty. Then the gospel came with the good news that, in Jesus Christ, there is neither male nor female, slave nor free, Jew or Gentile, nor any other distinction, that all the distinctions men make are broken down. They heard how Jesus treated women with value and respect. These women responded and said, "Yes! That's what I want. That's what I've been searching for!"

B. There were those who were opposed: But the majority of Jews responded differently. Let's read on. **"But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, 'These men who have upset the world have come here also; and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.' They**

stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them" (vv. 5-9). Notice that their resistance to the truth came from their hearts, not their minds. They were jealous and that kept them from seeing the truth. They went to the center of town to recruit some local thugs. Luke calls them "wicked men." They were likely just guys who didn't have anything better to do but make trouble, so they came with the Jews to the house of Jason, Paul's host, and sought to bring Paul and Silas out. But Jason had already sent them off somewhere. So they dragged Jason and some of the other brothers before the city officials, accusing them first of "upsetting the world" or, as another translation put it, "turning the world upside down." That's kind of funny. They actually had it backwards. The world has been upside-down ever since sin took hold of the human race through Adam. But when you turn something over that's already upside-down, you turn it right side up. That's what the gospel does. It allows us to live right side up in an upside down world. Then they accused them of saying there's another King, Jesus. There was some truth in that. I'm sure Paul had taught them that their ultimate allegiance was to King Jesus who would one day return to set up his kingdom. That's always a part of the gospel. Like Herod, Caesar would be threatened by that message.

But it appears the city officials didn't take their charges all that seriously. They simply asked Jason to post a bond or a pledge, probably saying Paul would leave and never come back. This may be what Paul means in his first letter to this church: **"For we wanted to come to you — I, Paul, more than once — and yet Satan thwarted us."** (1 Thess. 2:18). Paul tried to return but was unable because of the pledge Jason made and he saw this as the work of the enemy.

III. In Berea they were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica.

A. They received the word with great eagerness: The next stop for Paul was Berea. Berea is 60 miles from Thessalonica in the foothills of the Olympic mountains. It was a very different place than Thessalonica. It was off the beaten path. If Thessalonica was on the "highway" Berea was on the "byway." I kind of doubt this was part of their original plan but look what happened in Berea. **"The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. Therefore many of them believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men. But when the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there as well, agitating and stirring up the crowds. Then immediately the brethren sent Paul out to go as far as the sea; and Silas and Timothy remained there. Now those who escorted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they left"** (vv. 10-15).

Again, Paul enters the synagogue and no doubt he

began with the same method as before, reasoning from the Scriptures, explaining and showing that Jesus was the Messiah. But the people of Berea were different from the Thessalonians, and Luke intentionally draws a sharp contrast. He calls them “more noble-minded.” That’s a great way to be described, isn’t it? I want to be called noble-minded! The idea behind the word is to be willing to learn and to evaluate something fairly. It means to have an open mind. Do you get the idea? And it was with that spirit of openness and eagerness to learn that they received the word. They lapped it up like thirsty dogs at a flowing river. I love how Luke says “they examined the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.” You see, they had open minds but they didn’t have empty heads. Their openness was mixed with a healthy caution and discernment. I call it a “crap detector.” They didn’t just take Paul at his word. They checked it out for themselves. And not just with a cursory look, but with diligence; day after day they dug into the book, like it contained some kind of buried treasure. That’s what it means to be noble-minded. The idea of nobility makes me think of Kings. Maybe Luke used this word because of a verse in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs 25:2 says, **“It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, but the glory of kings is to search out a matter.”** You see, the Bereans got that. They understood that God conceals things so that we’ll search it out. It’s a glorious thing to search for answers; it’s a high minded, royal, kingly thing to do!

B. Many believed the Gospel: They were also different in that Luke says “many of them believed.” Not just “some” as in Thessalonica, but “many.” That’s talking about the Jews there. They found the things Paul said were true; they checked out. And again he says that “a number of prominent Greek women and men” believed. The gospel is now penetrating the upper classes. We sometimes think the gospel is just for the poor and needy. But you don’t have to be poor to be poor in spirit. I’ve found that God often uses prosperity and success to draw people to himself because those people often realize that none of those things can satisfy. One of the most exciting things happening today throughout our nation is that the gospel is making inroads into the halls of power. As a result, believers are making a difference in education and entertainment and politics. Well, that’s the kind of thing happening in Berea. I can imagine these prominent men and women going back to their lives and their jobs as very different people and making an impact.

C. The Jews from Thessalonica stir up trouble in Berea: But, as we have seen before, “where there’s light there’s bugs” because soon came the angry, jealous Jews panting down the road from Thessalonica. It wasn’t enough to drive Paul out of their town but now they pursue him 60 miles away and employ the same tactics. They move in and stir up the crowds and set them upon Paul and Silas. Poor Paul has to slip out of the city again by night. He sails for Athens, leaving Silas and Timothy behind to establish and encourage the church in Berea.

IV. Principle: The noble-minded are not those who believe anything but those who examine everything in light of Scripture.

But you almost have to wonder if they even needed them. Because the Bereans were well on their way to becoming mature believers. The noble-minded Bereans are a great example for us to follow. They teach us not to believe just anything but to examine everything in light of Scripture. So how does this play out in our lives?

This means we shouldn’t believe something just because it comes from a reliable source. It helps that it comes from a reliable source, but you should still check it out. Often I’ll hear someone state an opinion about something and then refer to some well-know preacher or scholar to back it up. I’ve done the same thing. But how do we know they’re right? You have to look for yourself. Just this past week someone asked me about something Ray Stedman believed. He assumed that our church believed the same thing. I think he was surprised when he heard I didn’t agree with Ray on that point. We can’t just parrot someone else; we all have to do our homework. We do this in other areas of life, why not in this most important area? Tell me, when you see a commercial on TV telling you to buy this product because so-and-so says it’s the best, do you automatically believe them? Why do we exercise more discernment in buying a deodorant than we do in choosing a faith?

We shouldn’t even believe someone just because they quote Scripture. You would be surprised how often false teaching is backed up with Bible verses. Most of the time those verses are ripped out of their original context. We call that “proof-texting.” For example, someone could say that unless we’re baptized we can’t be saved. They might quote Peter in Acts 2:38, **“Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins...”** Sounds pretty clear to me—no baptism; no forgiveness. But elsewhere the same question gets a different response. The Philippian jailer asked Paul, “What must I do to be saved?” Paul replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved...” What happened to baptism? That came later on; he was saved by believing, not baptism. We have to be careful.

Being noble-minded also means that we shouldn’t reject something just because it doesn’t fit with our preconceived ideas. We might think we have a pretty good handle on the truth. We might think we have our theology wrapped in a nice little box with a neat bow on it. But then someone comes along and says something that contradicts what we’ve always believed. What do you do? Do you say, “No way, that can’t be true. I’ve never heard anyone say that before. That’s not what my pastor taught me.” But what if it is true? You have to be willing and able to check it out for yourself.

Being noble-minded also impacts the way we present the truth. We should be prepared to not just preach the truth but to explain and prove it. Do you understand your faith well enough to do that? Listen to what the writer of Hebrews said: **“For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food”** (Heb. 5:12). I’m afraid that applies to some of you. Are you still on milk or can you handle steak? Babies have to be fed their milk, but adults

feed themselves. Do you feed yourself from the Word of God?

Today, we have an added challenge when it comes to presenting the truth. Paul could point these people to the Scriptures because they respected them. Today, most people think the Bible is shot through with errors and lies. So we must be prepared to prove the reliability of the Scriptures as well. All of this will require patience and the ability to dialogue with people and answer questions. It would be nice if we could just share a gospel tract with people and they would accept Jesus right on the spot, but those days are mostly over. People are operating today from a different set of presuppositions. It takes time, effort and patience to share the gospel.

Some teachers and preachers don't like to be questioned. They want people to buy what they say, period. Anyone who questions is labeled as rebellious. Watch out for those teachers. We should welcome your questions. We should encourage you to question and search the Scriptures for answers. Parents, this means that you need to allow your own kids to question their faith. If their faith is ever going to become their own, this has to happen on some level.

And do you know what? Even though we do all the right things, despite proof, there will be people whose minds are closed to the truth. Remember our original example? Herod found the right Bible verse about the King being born in Bethlehem, but his mind was shut off from submitting to that King. But the Wise Men found the right Scripture AND they heeded it. They went and found the baby and they worshipped him. And that's where our noble-minded study of the Scripture should always lead us. Right to the feet of the newborn King where we can worship him. Let me encourage you to grow into noble-minded followers of Christ, who do not believe just anything, but examine everything in light of Scripture.

We're going to close in just a minute with a new song that expresses the heartbeat of this story:

*Ancient words ever true
Changing me, and changing you
We have come with open hearts
Oh let the ancient words impart*

by Lynn DeShazo. "Ancient Words" 2001 © Hosanna Music