

Waking the Sleeping Giant - 23

Hearing from God

When Jesus spoke of truth, Pilate replied, "What is truth?" The question of Pilate is precisely the same question people are asking today, "What is truth?" How do you know what is true? Is there absolute truth, that is, truth which never changes? Or is truth relative? Is there truth which applies to all of us? Or are we in the same position described in the last chapter of the book of Judges where it says, "In those days there was no king (or authority) in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

Mankind has always been searching for the truth, but as we embrace the reality of the 21st century, forces conspire to make this search meaningless. Some would have you believe that truth is relative. They would say that truth is a subjective thing, that you must find what is true just for you. To them, there are no absolute truths, and if there is no absolute truth, then the search for truth becomes an exercise in futility. Without absolute truth, everything or nothing could be true. And if man, exercising his own limited wisdom, is left to discover the truth on his own, what we call truth is only the collective ignorance of mankind.

If there is no absolute truth, then we have no basis on which to evaluate what we hear. We are besieged on every side by those who would tell us what to believe. How are we to know what is true? There should be a way for the average man or woman or young person to evaluate what is right and what is wrong. Well, there certainly is.

God is the source of absolute truth and we discover that truth as we discover God. He speaks His pure truth to us in a variety of ways. The most obvious and reliable and objective source of truth is God's Word as revealed in the Scriptures, the Bible. The Creator God has provided all of His creation with a record of His dealings with mankind over many centuries, in a collection of written words which were inspired and then preserved by the Spirit of God.

When the Canon of Scripture was finalised and the Bible we now possess was formed, it was decreed by the Church leaders to be "The supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds and religious opinions should be tried." It is this book that stands as the objective test of revelation from God. The Bible doesn't contain all that God has ever said, nor is it the only vehicle for His life changing Word. However, it is the final, objective, agreed upon standard for testing everything that would be presented as the voice of God.

Acts 17:11-12 *"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. As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men."*

In the above text, we see an illustration of what can happen when people correctly respond to the Word of God. Here we will find several principles which can enable us, not only to discover the truth, but to apply it to our lives. Paul and Silas had been in Thessalonica preaching the Gospel to the Jews there. But some of the Jews were jealous and created an uproar.

They stirred up the people so much that it became dangerous for Paul and Silas to remain there. So, the brethren hustled them out of town in the middle of the night and sent them to Berea. Of course, when they came to Berea, they continued preaching.

They went immediately into the synagogue of the Jews. But the people they found in Berea were of a different calibre than those in Thessalonica. Verse 11 tells us the people in Berea were of more noble character than the Thessalonians. Why were they more noble? The answer to that question is found in the way they reacted to the Word of God.

“Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness ...” (v. 11a)

The people in Berea were more noble because they received the message with eagerness. There was an openness to the Word preached to them. They had an anticipation, an expectancy, that God might be speaking to them. And this is what set them apart. There was a readiness and receptivity to the Word of God. These are the characteristics which made them a cut above those who had just rejected the truth. And these are the characteristics which enabled them to hear from God.

There are many who engage with the church today without the expectation that God will speak to them. Perhaps coming to a church worship service has just become a habit, and so, very little thought is given to why we are there. Or, perhaps because of past experience in a church where the gospel was not fully preached, nothing is really expected. The unfortunate consequence is that generally speaking, when nothing is expected, nothing is gained. We need to always come into the presence of God and His people with the expectation that God will speak to us. We need to come with an eagerness of mind, with an openness to hear what God would say. If these qualities are cultivated by us, they will place us in a position where we can hear the voice of God.

God most certainly will speak to us, but only if we listen for Him. The still, small voice of the Holy Spirit can be crowded out by the clamour of the many voices of the world flooding our minds. That is why we must give time and concentration to listen for God to speak. We must focus in on Him.

Expectancy can actually be cultivated. It can also be hindered and lost. You cultivate expectancy by spending time with the Lord in prayer as you prepare to hear His voice. I wonder how many of us spend time in prayer before gathering for worship each Sunday. Do we intentionally come before God and ask Him to speak to us as we gather together? If not, why not? If we do pray for our Sunday worship times during the week, then we are more likely to arrive on the day with a sense of anticipation about what God is about to say and do. Our worship services should be a culmination and celebration of a week in preparation.

Think of what is going on in any given worship service and all the preparation which precedes that time we spend together. There is preparation in the planning of the service; preparation in the order of service ; the music, the musicians and singers. The leader has to prepare, as does the preacher and those who pray and those who work the sound system etc. People have cleaned the building and switched on the air-conditioning in anticipation of you coming. All of this preparation takes place to make sure we have a service which will honour God and edify His people. But there should also be preparation by those who attend. You must prepare yourself by prayer to be in a position to hear from God when you come. Of course, much could be said concerning the need to prepare for our services by also sharing with others, inviting them to church, and bringing them with you. When that is the case, we put these people in a place to meet Christ. Nothing is more exciting in a service than to see people come to Christ. That's one form of preparation that needs to be done more.

At the very least, if you would pray for God to speak to you, then a growing sense of anticipation and expectancy would certainly be cultivated in your own life, and you would be coming to worship with a ready mind and a receptive heart. Then, like the Bereans, you will receive the Word of God with eagerness. Not only did the Bereans receive the Word, they discerned the Word. They received the Word because they were of a ready mind. They discerned the truth of the Word because they searched for it, "...for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." (v. 11b)

These Bereans weren't content with just the words of man. The reasoning of mere mortals was certainly not enough for them. They wanted a sure word. They wanted a "thus saith the Lord." And so, it says of them, that they searched the Scriptures daily to see whether what they were hearing was true. It seems to me that this is the great need in our society today. People are tired of hearing the conflicting words of so-called experts, handing out so much pop-psychology passing for truth. But it is everywhere, and it is sickening to watch.

For the last few decades now, one of the fastest-growing types of television show has been the talk-show. These shows purport to give us information, truth, if you will, which will be valuable to us in living our lives and sorting out the important questions we face. In these shows, the hosts bounce from one person to another, trying to tap the collective wisdom of mankind. The shows are interesting because we all like to hear what other people think. But are these shows full of truth? Do these shows give us a sure word? Far from it, I'm afraid.

It doesn't really matter what the collective majority are saying or doing. We don't need to ask, "What are others saying?" We always need to be asking, "What is God saying?" We need a sure word. We must have a way to know what is true. The Bereans knew how to find that sure word. They found it in the Scriptures. They found it as they connected to the discerning power of the Spirit Who inspired the writing and the reading of these Scriptures.

We see that they examined the Scriptures daily. In the King James translation, it says they searched the Scriptures daily. The literal translation of that word is that they sifted the Scriptures. That means the Bereans poured over the Scripture, comparing Scripture with Scripture, evaluating the word they were hearing from these apostles against the counsel of God's Word in the Scriptures. That is precisely what we need to do also. What we see here is a strong statement for the priesthood of all believers. The priesthood of all believers is a doctrine we Baptists hold dear. It affirms several important truths. Firstly, the equality of all believers as priests before God. Secondly, the right of each believer to direct access to God in Christ. And thirdly, the responsibility of each 'priest' to minister to others.

As the priesthood of the believer relates to Scripture, it says that everyone can hear from God through His Word and His Spirit. And that is precisely what we see exemplified in this passage of Scripture. The Bereans searched the Scriptures because they knew they could hear from God. You see, it doesn't take a theologian or Biblical scholar or high priest or robed Bishop to interpret the Word of God for you. God gives each of us the Holy Spirit to reveal His word to our hearts.

This is why a high view of Scripture is so vital to our faith. Some people would contend that a person's view of the Scripture is not that important. I contend that the priesthood of the believer depends on a high view of Scripture. You see, if the Scripture is not true, from beginning to end, then who will tell us what part is true? If the Scripture is truth mixed with error, then we will need a priestly class to tell us what to believe and what not to believe. Someone once said, "*The liberals who believe the Bible is inspired in spots also believe they are the only ones inspired to tell us where the spots are.*"

It is precisely because the Bible is trusted as the final source of truth in all matters of faith, that everyone can read it, confident they will hear from God. Yes, it is a confusing and difficult book to understand and put in perspective – there's no doubt about that. To fully digest the spiritual nourishment of this book one needs some teaching, equipping and help. Confusing or not, this is still the objective standard which all sincere Christians hold to as the truth.

But regardless of how high your view of Scripture is, if you do not read, you will never know the truth it contains! You must want to know that truth enough to read the Bible and search it daily. If you do not, you will either just accept what someone else says is the truth and be led into error, or not hear what God is saying to you in the first place, and thereby fail to fully embrace His plan and purpose for your life.

These Bereans searched the Scriptures daily to discern the Word of God. Verse 12 then tells us that many of them believed as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men. These people received the Word because their minds were prepared. They discerned the Word because they embraced the truth. They responded to the Word because they received the revelation. They responded because they had received revelation through their study of the Word.

In Paul's letter to the Romans he says, *"So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ."* When believers encounter the Word of God, the Bible teaches that faith is birthed in our hearts. The process is outlined in this passage in Romans. It begins with the Word. Notice it does not say, *"faith comes by hearing the word,"* but rather, *"faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word."* The picture is not of simply the believer and his/her Bible. The picture is the believer, the Holy Spirit and the Bible. It is by the action of the Holy Spirit as we read the Bible, that we come to a place of spiritually hearing what God has to say in His Word.

You can hear with your physical ears and never hear with your spiritual ears. You can see with your physical eyes and never see with your spiritual eyes. As you open and read the Bible, or hear it preached or taught, you should prayerfully ask God to reveal and apply His truth to your life. As you do, the Holy Spirit will be faithful to speak to your heart the truth of God's Word. He will apply it to your life. He will give you ears to hear and eyes to see. And as He does, faith will rise up in your heart. You will not only understand the truth of the Word of God, you will be challenged and changed by it. Only then are we enabled to respond to the Word of God like these Bereans.

These Bereans responded to the Word because they received the revelation of God as they searched the Scriptures daily. The reason why they responded was that they were committed to put what they would hear from God into practice.

You see, these Bereans wanted to hear from God so that they could live for God. So many people today want to hear from God before they decide whether they are going to obey what they hear. But they will never hear until they are willing to obey.

There is a moral element involved in hearing truth. Over and over, Jesus would say, *"He who has ears to hear, let him hear."* Not everyone has ears to hear. Only those who are willing to obey what they hear, can be said to really have ears to hear. In John 7:17 it says, *"If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak from Myself."*

A person must be willing to do God's will in order to have the discernment to be able to hear from God. There is a moral element involved in hearing truth. Are you willing to do His will once He has revealed it to you? That is the real question you need to answer today.

Many people want to know what His will is first, to see whether they like it or not. But we must be willing to allow the Word of God, applied by the Spirit of God, to change us into the image of Jesus Christ. But in order for that to happen, we must, like the Bereans, receive the Word with a ready mind; discern the Word because we desire the truth; and respond to the Word because we have received a revelation from God and desire to obey Him.

If we really want to see the power of God in our lives, in our families, in our church, and in our city and beyond, we must proclaim and live by His Word. In His Word is life. In His Word is power. In His Word is light. In His Word is salvation. The good news of God is found here, and we must proclaim it.

Karl Barth, one of the most prolific theologians to have ever lived, was once asked what was the most profound theological truth he had ever discovered. It is said that he thought for just a moment and then replied, "Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so."

This world-renowned Bible scholar; this theological giant; the writer of 'Systematic Theology' – the highest selling theological textbook in history; this intellectual and academic guru regarded the opening line of a children's hymn as the most profound theological truth ever discovered!

Unlike many Biblical scholars, Karl Barth had encountered the living, dynamic, life-transforming, personal God in His Word. May we be committed to doing the same in our desire to hear from God and know the truth. We will never see the sleeping giant wake up if God's people cannot or will not actively seek His face and listen for His voice, each and every day!