

A photograph of a dirt path winding through a lush green park. The path is made of brown earth and is flanked by vibrant green grass and numerous small purple flowers. Tall trees with green foliage line the path, and their shadows are cast onto the ground. The sky is a clear, bright blue. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

Understanding the Times

by Ken Hollands

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1 Chronicles 12:23; 32; Luke 9:51-55; Ephesians 2:11-19; 4:1-4; 25;
2 Timothy 3:13-4:5; 18

Introduction

I have in mind to speak about *“understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do”*; firstly, to refer to that time when those who had an understanding of the times came to anoint David king out of all the tribes of Israel, and secondly to refer to the time we are in, the era of the grace of God, so that we might understand the spirit that is proper to our time. We should then note the contrast between the Old Testament time when Israel was viewed as a distinct people by themselves and what is true now of the church, the assembly of God’s people, where believers of all nationalities form one body in Christ. Finally, I want to say a word about the conduct that is proper to the time we are in, at the end of the Christian era.

I trust that those who hear will consider and evaluate what I am going to say. The Scripture says, *“do not lightly esteem prophecies; but prove all things, hold fast the right”* (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21). Therefore, there is an obligation not only on the speaker to seek to speak what is right but an obligation on those who hear to test things by the word of God and see if these things are so.

What the people of God should do at a particular time depends on an understanding of the times they are in and the following Bible passages should make that clear. In the days of Hezekiah, a huge Assyrian army came against Jerusalem and it looked as if it would be overwhelmed. Hezekiah who characteristically was a good king and loved God, sought God’s help and received a message through the prophet Isaiah that God would defend and save the city. God did bring about deliverance! The huge army that was surrounding Jerusalem was destroyed by God (2 Kings 19:35).

Later on, when Nebuchadnezzar was besieging Jerusalem the word of the Lord from Jeremiah to the king Zedekiah was to go forth to the Chaldeans and not stay in Jerusalem (Jeremiah 38:2-3, 17, 18). Because of their sins God was not going to deliver them. The conduct that was appropriate in the time of Hezekiah was not appropriate in the time of Zedekiah. Therefore, it is very important to understand the time to know what people who fear God ought to do.

Crowning David

In the first Scripture the right thing to do was to make David king and it says *“the men equipped for military service, who came to David to Hebron, to transfer the kingdom of Saul to him”*.

I do not know if there is anyone here who is still in their sins, anyone who is still without Christ? Is there anyone who has not yet crowned Christ Lord of all? I would encourage you today to crown Christ Lord of all and transfer your life to Him that He

might reign over you. I believe that the greatest blessing you can have is to let Christ reign over your life.

Like some young people here I have been young once and I came to meetings and heard about Jesus. I have had plenty of ups and downs since then but I will say this: the greatest thing you can do in your life is to crown Christ Lord of all. He will give you direction and guidance, help and support through your life here and provide an eternity of bliss, knowing that you belong to Christ and you belong to Him for ever.

The Era of God's Grace

In the passage read in Luke's gospel Jesus was going through Samaria on His way to Jerusalem and He did not get a good reception. These Samaritans were remiss in failing to receive Jesus. I would encourage everyone to receive Jesus. He is available to everyone. He says, "*him that comes to me I will not at all cast out*" (John 6:37). What a Saviour He is! He wants to receive us. He wants to help us. He wants to bless us for time and eternity.

James and John, two of His disciples, saw what was happening and said, "*Lord, wilt thou that we speak that fire come down from heaven and consume them, as also Elias did?*" Elias is the Elijah of the Old Testament who called down fire from heaven upon people who were acting very wrongly as we read in 2 Kings 1. King Ahaziah was a wicked king who had such a bad accident he was unsure if he would survive. What did he do? Did he seek God? We can seek God at all times. I would encourage people to seek God wherever they are. "*God is our refuge and strength, a help in distresses, very readily found*" (Psalm 46:1). But Ahaziah did not seek God, he sent messengers to a false god to find out if he would recover. Elijah met them and he gave them a word from God for the king. Ahaziah then sent messengers to capture Elijah as his father had tried to do previously. They came with effrontery to arrest Elijah. Elijah called down fire from heaven on two occasions and each time it consumed 50 people. Jesus did not condemn what Elijah did.

But when Jesus was here on earth, we are in a different time – "*God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself*" (2 Corinthians 5:19). Most of us know that when Jesus preached in the synagogue of Nazareth, He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah, found the place in the scroll and read the passage, "*To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD*". He missed out the last clause which reads "*and the day of vengeance of our God*" (Isaiah 61:2). He missed it out deliberately because it is not yet the day of vengeance of our God. In other words, it was a different time from the time of Elijah. It is not now the time for calling down fire from heaven to destroy enemies. It is the time of the grace of God.

I do not know if John and James were present at that preaching of Jesus in Nazareth but they should have understood the kind of spirit that Jesus was displaying when He was serving here. Jesus rebuked them for wanting fire from heaven to consume these Samaritans. However, they consulted Christ! That is a good thing to do if we are unsure about anything. He will guide you by His word as to what is suitable conduct

at the present time (Psalm 73:24).

How out of keeping they were with the spirit that marked Jesus! He then went on to Jerusalem and while suffering on that cross at Calvary, what did He say about those who had put Him on the cross? *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”* (Luke 23:34). That is the spirit of the Christian era.

Stephen in the Acts embodied that spirit. He brought home to the leaders of the Jewish nation their guilt in murdering Jesus. However, while being stoned to death Stephen did not call for vengeance but cried with a loud voice, *“Lord, lay not this sin to their charge”* (Acts 7:60).

I think John eventually grasped that spirit too. When he writes his gospel, he devotes almost a whole chapter to the Lord serving the people of Samaria. He served the woman in Samaria who came out to draw water. What grace He showed to her! When others heard of the change that had happened in her life, they came to Jesus and they themselves believed Him. I think John benefitted from the rebuke of Jesus and made sure that, when he wrote his gospel by the help of the Spirit of God, he inserted how Jesus had helped people in Samaria.

That is important in our day. With all the conflict at the present time I dug out some papers recently, written by a brother to the authorities in 1940 when he was called up and he had appealed on grounds of conscience that he might not have to bear arms. I was affected by all the scriptures he brought forward to support his plea, yet his willingness to serve suffering humanity. We can learn from people in the past about events that we personally have not experienced. Some people in other lands like Ukraine are going through dreadful hardship at the present time but it is a great thing to understand the Spirit of the Christian era that should mark each one of us while we await the Lord's return.

There is a time of judgment coming. It forms a background to the gospel. Romans tells us that, *“there is revealed wrath of God from heaven upon all impiety, and unrighteousness of men holding the truth in unrighteousness”* (Romans 1:18). But the time we are in is the era of the grace of God. God is stretching His hands out in blessing all the day long to people disobeying and opposing (Romans 10:21). God is waiting in grace to bless men. Let us grasp the spirit of the Christian era and let it characterise us now.

One Body in Christ

Ephesians 2 describes another change from the Old Testament time, where we read that God intended the nation of Israel to be a people distinct, *“a people that shall dwell alone and shall not be reckoned among the nations”* (Numbers 23:9). The Jews were distinct; the Gentiles were different. God intended that the Gentiles might be blessed with the Jews (Genesis 12:3; 17:6, 7) but the Jews were to be a distinct people by themselves. In Christianity this has changed.

In Christianity when a Jew comes to Christ or a Gentile comes to Christ, they

become one in Christ. They belong to the one church, to the church of Jesus Christ. I received help years ago by being told something very simple: two, one, two. In the Old Testament Jew and Gentile were distinct. In Christianity, people of faith, whether Jew or Gentile, form one body in Christ. That is why I do not like the concept of people of different ethnic groups worshipping the Lord by themselves. The concept in Christianity is that all believers are one in Christ.

After the church goes to be with Christ there will be two entities again on earth. In the millennium when people want help, where will they go? They will flow up to Jerusalem to obtain advice and they will recognise the one true God who is the God of Israel (Isaiah 2:3). But in the time of Christianity Jew and Gentile are brought together to form one body in Christ.

Now, that has important implications. When Paul went to Ephesus, he initially met Jews who only knew about the teaching of John the Baptist. Paul preached a full gospel and some became believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. In Ephesus, there then were people from a Jewish background who loved Jesus.

Other people in Ephesus who came to Christ were from very different backgrounds. They were heathens. They had worshipped idols. They had books of curious charms, evil charms. But they were converted, they came to faith in Christ. What a difference! You can just imagine them walking together – the Jews with their particular garb, such as long tassels based on the Old Testament (Numbers 15:38). And then there were these Gentile people who were used to all kinds of sexual immorality and wickedness, worshipping false gods until they were converted. It must have been difficult to work out assembly life together.

But Paul writes to the assembly of God in Ephesus comprising people who were from Jewish backgrounds and Gentile backgrounds yet brought together as a result of the work of the Lord Jesus. What a change had happened! Paul states the Gentiles were *“aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise”*, yet the Lord, *“has preached the glad tidings of peace to you who were afar off”*, that is, the Gentiles *“and the glad tidings of peace to those who were nigh”*, to the Jews. And the result was that *“Christ ... is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of enclosure”*. In John’s gospel chapter 4 we see the great separation there was between Samaritans and Jews (verse 9). But in Christ Jesus that divide is gone through the death of Christ. The Jews needed salvation, the Gentiles needed salvation, but they were brought together in one body in Christ.

So it says, *“having annulled the enmity in his flesh”*, the enmity that existed between Jew and Gentile, *“that he might form the two in himself into one new man, making peace”*. God’s plan was that believers in Ephesus whether Jews or Gentiles became one so that the character of Christ was seen there in them. And then, through Christ, we both, that is Jew and Gentile, have the same access by one Spirit to worship God the Father.

There was no suggestion of Jewish believers looking down on those from a Gentile background because it says, *“ye are no longer strangers”*, no longer foreigners, *“but*

ye are fellow-citizens of the saints". What dignity, what status according to God, as sons of God and saints of God marked every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is the same today!

The result in these Jewish and Gentile Christians was a product for God. The apostle John wrote in Revelation that the church in Ephesus had left its first love (Revelation 2:4). The Christians there had once been marked with love that was fresh and vibrant, love for the Lord Jesus, love for God the Father, love for one another and love for the truth. What a great triumph for God to observe such love in that city of Ephesus!

The way for the continuance of that love is set out in Chapter 4. *"I exhort you"* - that includes me, you, and all people of diverse backgrounds who have come under the shelter of the blood of Jesus and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. We thus have obligations towards one another. One of the things we have to do is to *"walk worthy of the calling"* - what a dignified calling we have - *"wherewith ye have been called"*. *"Walking with all lowliness and meekness"* is appropriate conduct consistent with the great calling we have, as belonging to this wonderful vessel which Christ will use to sing the Father's praises eternally.

We are told to have long-suffering. It is very easy to have a short fuse, very easy to fall out with one another. In fact, later Paul is quite specific in practical exhortations. He says, for example, *"wherefore, having put off falsehood, speak truth every one with his neighbour, because we are members one of another"*. So we see that the Ephesian ex-heathen and the Ephesian ex-Jewish follower were members one of the other. They probably saw things they did not like in each other. The Jew would see things they did not like in the Gentile Christians. The Gentiles might see some things they did not like in some of the Jewish people. But they are told that they are members one of another.

We believers in the Lord Jesus have to watch our tongues. In the Proverbs, we are told one of the things that God hates is *"he that soweth discords among brethren"* (Proverbs 6:16, 19). We all have to watch! The history that I know among believers is that unwise things, sometimes wrong things, sometimes untruthful things have been said to one another. Let us understand that in our times God is bringing together people of disparate backgrounds to be here for His pleasure and to have their part in worshipping the one true God. Let us be concerned to be careful in what we say about one another to speak truth, to speak accurately, to speak things that glorify Christ while we wait for His return.

The Time Today

I now refer to Second Timothy. One of the things it pleased the Spirit of God to do before the canon of Scripture closed was to show things that lay ahead. At times many Christians have thought that the gospel would eventually spread and be accepted in every country to fill the earth with the knowledge of God. That is not what Scripture teaches.

God is calling out from the nations a people for His name (Acts 15:14). The gospel

is available to all and any one can come to Christ and, as indwelt by the Holy Spirit, thus form part of His church. But Paul warns that difficult times will come. There is no point in pretending otherwise. Now is a very difficult time to be a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. A brother just wrote to me from elsewhere in the world wanting to know the way forward for his life. I can understand that concern. I, too, need to know the way forward for my life.

However, Paul gives Timothy guidance as to what to do in such difficult times, even although there would be people who are *"wicked men and juggling impostors"* advancing *"in evil, leading and being led astray"*. Regrettably, that is what is happening today, and not just happening from non-Christian sources but happening within the Christian profession.

What was Timothy to do? Was he to give up, to go underground, as it were, and do nothing? Paul does not say that at all! Firstly, he tells him to "abide in those things which thou hast learned, and of which thou hast been fully persuaded, knowing of whom thou hast learned them". Timothy would have learned from Paul. Timothy, no doubt, was a convert of Paul, who refers to him as a beloved child, and as a father Paul tells him to abide in his teaching. In effect he says to Timothy, whatever others are doing you make sure that you abide in those things that you have learned.

And then he adds *"that from a child thou hast known the sacred letters"*. No doubt he had heard the Scriptures from his mother and his grandmother. It is a great privilege to be brought up in a Christian home. God can take people from all kinds of backgrounds and He is doing so: non-Christian backgrounds, dreadful backgrounds, ungodly backgrounds and making them followers of Jesus. But Timothy had this privilege. The sacred letters would be the Old Testament which as well as the New Testament are divinely inspired, *"which are able to make thee wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus"*.

So, on the one hand Paul is saying to Timothy, 'Look, despite what anyone else thinks, you hold on, you guard, you protect, you value what you have had in the way of right teaching'. We now have the letters of Peter and John and Paul as well as the Old Testament. How valuable it is to have the Holy Scriptures available as a divine test for anything that is said and for every doctrine that is promulgated. The great need is to stand by it. Stand by it in our thinking but also in our lives: in other words, put it into practice. Also stand by it by contending *"for the faith once delivered to the saints"* (Jude 3).

But Paul did not stop there. He does not just say, 'make a big fence around yourselves and ignore everybody else'. Paul also says, *"proclaim the word"*, in other words, tell forth the message of the glad tidings of Jesus to others.

He emphasises it by also saying, *"proclaim the word; be urgent in season and out of season"*. He does not say that it is not the time to tell people about Jesus. But rather Paul is telling Timothy to get on with it!

Paul also says to Timothy, *"be sober in all things"*. In other words, watch yourself, keep yourself right. I have to do that. There is no testimony for God if I tell people

about Jesus and then go and steal from them or lie to them. It is important that our lives are consistent with things we say. But at the same time, Paul says, proclaim the word. Keep doing it, keep telling people about the Saviour.

And so he says, *“be sober in all things, bear evils”*. Bear evils. It is not easy to accept reproach, to stand up to criticism. Some of our brothers and sisters in parts of the world have to do more than this, enduring physical violence, enduring mental torture because of their faith in Jesus. But Paul says, bear evils. And then he says, *“do the work of an evangelist”*. In other words, reach out to others with the gospel of the grace of God while we wait for Christ’s return.

There are two references here to His appearing (2 Timothy 4:1, 8). Christ is going to come again. He is going to come again for His church but He is also going to appear in His glory and reign. It is important in our time that we make use of the time we have to stand by what is right and also to proclaim what is right. And the message must centre in Jesus. Preach *“Jesus Christ, and him crucified”* (1 Corinthians 2:2). That is what Paul did when he came to Corinth.

What a wonderful message we have. Jesus has come here, He has died here, He has been crucified here but He is now glorified at the right hand of God, risen from among the dead. What a wonderful Saviour!

In this letter Paul was about to leave the world, he had not long to live. What was he concerned about? He wanted Timothy to carry on the good work that he had started, and also to remember that Christ has a heavenly kingdom. He ends with this doxology, *“to whom be glory for the ages of ages”*. How wonderful to be marked by giving glory to Christ!

How rightly crowned is Jesus! May we be helped to crown Him in our affections and in our praises now, to understand the time, the time of the grace of God. The time too when God is bringing people of disparate backgrounds together so that He might show that there is a unity brought about by the Spirit of God. Let us also understand the time we are in at the end of the Christian era that we might both stand for and proclaim the truth of God. May the Lord bless us all for His name’s sake.

Address given by Ken Hollands 7 May 2022

Scripture quotations are from the Darby translation unless stated

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