

Followers of the Way

Sermon: 13th February 2022

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Part 2: Understanding the times

I Chronicles 12:22-40

The passage we just heard talks about “men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do.” (1 Chronicles 12:32). We want (need) to be people who don’t simply understand the times in which we’re living, but who know what to do as a result. Understanding isn’t valuable simply for its own sake. It’s a platform to enable us to manifest the kingdom of God more powerfully in whatever setting the LORD has placed us. Understanding provides focus for prayer and action. So, we’ll first set the scene and then consider (a) what understanding is, (b) how we can gain more of it, (c) what sort of times we’re living in and (d) what we should do as a result.

Background

Let’s start with some context in terms of time and place. These verses describe the early days of King David’s rule over Israel, roughly a thousand years before the birth of Christ. To recap briefly:

After the death of Saul, David was recognised as king by “all Israel” (1 Chronicles 11:1). This was a physical fulfilment of what had been done in the Spirit years before, when God told the prophet Samuel to anoint the young shepherd boy as king. (1 Samuel 16:12-13).

As king, David did what Saul and Joshua had been unable to do, capturing Jerusalem and making it his capital (1 Chronicles 11:4-7). Jerusalem was “built up” and “David became more and more powerful, because the LORD Almighty was with him.” (1 Chronicles 11:8-9).

David’s “mighty men gave his kingship strong support to extend it over the whole land, as the LORD had promised.” (1 Chronicles 11:10). These included David’s earliest followers, who’d joined him in dark days when he was an outlaw and a fugitive: “the men who came to David at Ziklag, while he was banished from the presence of Saul” (1 Chronicles 12:1).

The Chronicler draws a parallel between David’s forces and “the army of God.” (1 Chronicles 12:22), then lists “the men armed for battle who came to David at Hebron to turn Saul’s kingdom over to him, as the LORD had said” (1 Chronicles 12:23).

Pausing there, we see (a) the working out in the physical of what was already a spiritual reality (the fact of David’s being king); (b) the fulfilment of things long promised and hoped for (the capture of Jerusalem); (c) God’s ability to build His army from unpromising material (when they first flocked to him, the ones who became David’s mighty men were the distressed, indebted and discontented of society: 1 Samuel 22: 2). Things in the spiritual realms come first, physical manifestations afterwards.

The importance of unity is emphasised: “the Israelites were ... of one mind to make David king.” (1 Chronicles 12:38). If there’s unity and alignment with God’s purposes, success follows. Aligning with God’s purposes puts us on the same side as Him, meaning that He is with us: “David became more and more powerful, because the LORD Almighty was with him.” (1 Chronicles 11:8-9).

The tribe of Issachar

This tribe isn’t singled out because of status, position or earthly power. The list in 1 Chronicles 12:24-37 shows their manpower contribution was probably least of all the twelve tribes. And while others are noted for: (a) weaponry (1 Chronicles 12:24, 34 and 37); (b) readiness for battle (1 Chronicles 12:25 and 35); (c) bravery (1 Chronicles 12:26 and 30); (d) loyalty (1 Chronicles 12:29 and 33); and (e) experience (1 Chronicles 12:33 and 36), Issachar doesn’t merit a mention for any of these attributes.

Neither was there anything in the past to suggest that Issachar was special. Issachar was the fifth of Jacob’s sons by Leah (Genesis 30:18). Although the name sounds like the Hebrew word for reward, when Jacob prophesied over his sons, he said, “Issachar is a scrawny donkey lying down between two saddlebags. When he sees how good is his resting place and how pleasant is his land, he will bend his shoulder to the burden and submit to forced labour.” (Genesis 49:14-15).¹ So at first sight the tribe descended from Issachar seems an unlikely recipient of praise and an improbable source of anything good.

This is a great encouragement, because if people from such an unpromising background can do it, so can we. The only thing that set them apart was having understanding of the times and knowing what Israel should do. They had greater wisdom, insight and understanding than the others, and these are things we can all acquire: “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.” (James 1:5).

Though the Bible doesn’t specifically say so, Issachar probably played a vital role in persuading other tribes to accept David as king. Their understanding enabled God’s people to align with His purposes. Our understanding should be used the same way – our King being the greater David, namely Jesus.

Limits to understanding

Before we go further, it’s worth reflecting on what humans can and cannot know. We don’t possess all knowledge. Certain things will remain unknown by us: Moses called them “the secret things [that] belong to the Lord our God” (Deuteronomy 29:29). Some of these are unknowable by reason of our human limitations, others unknown because God chooses not to reveal them at this point.

Nevertheless, we can apply our God-given reason and the insights He gives so as to understand our times. It’s precisely since we have this ability that Jesus criticised religious leaders for failing to use it: “The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. He replied, ‘... You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the sign of the times.’” (Matthew 16:1-3).²

The Bible often links understanding with the closeness of our walk with God: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” Scripture counsels us, “With all thy getting, get understanding.” (Proverbs 4:7, KJV). If we’re to be people who aren’t “ever hearing but never understanding”, (Matthew 13:14, Mark 4:12, Acts 28:26, each quoting Isaiah 6:9),

¹ After the conquest of Canaan, the tribe of Issachar was allotted land south-west of the Sea of Galilee (Joshua 19:17-23).

² Even pagan servants of King Xerxes are said to be capable of a certain level of insight: “Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times” (Esther 1:13).

we need to seek God's face in prayer, make time to wait on Him, and study and reflect on His Word in the Bible. Understanding the times and knowing what to do means looking at events from God's perspective and taking the whole counsel of God from His Word, not just selected passages.

Guides to understanding

The Bible gives a number of broad principles to help guide our understanding:

THE CENTRALITY OF ISRAEL: God says of Israel, "whoever touches you touches the apple of my eye" (Zechariah 2:8). The apple of the eye is the pupil. So, touching Israel is like poking God in the eye, but Israel is also in some sense a lens through which God views the world. Nations will be judged on the basis of how they've treated Israel and the Jewish people: see for example the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 24:31-46. God's principle is: "first to the Jew, then to the Gentile" (Romans 2:10). Since believers are "grafted into ... [the] cultivated olive tree [of Israel]" (Romans 11:17), by looking at Israel, we get a foretaste of what's happening in and to the Church.

THE FORERUNNER PRINCIPLE: Just as "John the Baptist came ... [to] prepare the way for the Lord" (Matthew 3:1 and 3), so the Bible shows forerunners of many kinds. Biblical prophecy almost always has an initial fulfilment, with a greater fulfilment following. So, there is "the Antichrist" (1 John 2:18, 2:22 and 4:3, 2 John 1:7), but "even now many antichrists have come" (1 John 2:18). We can look at many historical figures and see them not as *the* Antichrist, but as forerunners. Seeing their methods and characteristics helps us be alert as to what to expect from the Antichrist.

PHYSICAL CLUES TO SPIRITUAL REALITIES: Studying what the Bible says about the history of ancient Israel is vital, since they had to do in the physical what we're called to do in the spiritual dimension. Lessons from Israel's wars, for example, can be applied to spiritual warfare. Unity and giving strong support to godly leaders is as important for us as in King David's day. Strategies which God gave in former times may also be relevant in the present. And so on and so forth.

SOWING, WAITING AND REAPING: Jesus often used examples from the natural world in his parables. He talks about sowing seed, a mustard tree, weeds, a fig tree and harvest-time. The natural world is an imperfect parallel of spiritual realities, since in the physical we only see "a shadow of good things that are coming" (Hebrews 10:1), but all the same, there are things we can learn by studying nature: "There is a time for all everything, and a season for every activity under heaven." (Ecclesiastes 3:1). Recognising the season is a vital part of knowing how to position ourselves. Sometimes we need to wait patiently, sowing in year one, waiting in year two and reaping in year three.

COUNTERFEITS AND COUNTERPARTS: The Bible tells us all we need to know about the nature of the ultimate enemy of mankind. Since Satan "masquerades as an angel of light, it should not surprise us therefore that his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness." (2 Corinthians 11:14-15). The devil is "a liar and the father of lies." (John 8:44). Lying, subterfuge and counterfeits are the stock-in-trade of the enemy. For everything God wishes for good, we can therefore expect Satan to try and bring in an evil counterpart. There is a "synagogue of Satan" (Revelation 2:9) to match the gathered community of God, for example. Satan wants to bring in his end-time scheme for world government and a universal religion (and much more besides), which will be promoted on the basis that they are wholesome and righteous.

UNCOVERING FALSEHOOD: Part of the masquerade of Satan and those who serve him is to present a pleasing and beguiling surface to deceive and entrap the unwary. If we saw the end result straight away, we would run from him in an instant. Jesus gives us the fail-safe way to spot what is good and what isn't: look at the fruit, because that's the tell-tale sign. It's "by their fruit you will recognise them [false prophets]" (Matthew 7:16 and 20).

BIRTHING: Paul speaks of “the whole creation ... groaning as in the pains of childbirth” (Romans 8:22) and Jesus talks about signs of the end of the age being “the beginning of birth pains” (Matthew 24:8, Mark 13:8). As in the natural world, we can expect the contractions to increase in frequency and intensity over time.

THE IMMINENCE OF JESUS’ RETURN: Describing signs of the end of the age, Jesus told his disciples, “Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” (Luke 21:24). The rebirth of the state of Israel in 1948 means the times of the Gentiles have been fulfilled. The fact that this event “a country ... born in a day ... [and] a nation ... brought forth in a moment” (Isaiah 66:8) is described so close to the end of the prophetic book (Isaiah) that mirrors the Bible itself emphasises how close we are to the Lord’s return.

This is the start of a sermon series and we’ll be exploring these things more in the weeks ahead.

The times in which we live

Paul said, “There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness but denying its power.” (2 Timothy 3:1). Since this describes our own circumstances all too well, we could become downhearted and think we’re in a hole from which there is no escape. We know there’s lots about the state of both Church and nation that’s bad. But there’s plenty of cause for hope, too.

We can readily see that God is shaking the nations – all nations, ours included. Shifts are taking place that threaten to overturn accepted ways of doing things and former sources of security in politics, the environment, economics and society. The world tells us plenty about these things and offers its solutions, but how do things look from God’s perspective, and what are His solutions?

Knowing what to do

We have to be able to look beyond rolling news headlines to understand what God’s doing and to align with His purposes. We don’t need information, but revelation. We don’t need the opinions of man but the wisdom of God. And we don’t need human theorising but should instead examine all we see and hear against the plumbline of God’s Word in the Bible.

Take climate change as one example. How often in this debate do we hear God’s promise, “As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest cold and heat, winter and summer, day and night will never cease.” (Genesis 8:21-22)? Or acknowledge that the apostle John foresaw days when “the sun was given power to scorch people with fire” (Revelation 16:8)? Unless we bring these Scriptures into account, we’re likely to go down a wrong track. Amongst wars and rumours of wars and the enemy’s smokescreens and diversions, we need to stand on what is true and certain: God’s Word.

This year the Queen celebrates her Platinum Jubilee, marking seventy years on the throne. Jubilee in the Bible is a time of forgiving debts, freeing slaves and prisoners and resetting the nation’s wealth and economic relationships. It’s a time when God’s mercies are particularly manifest. Of course, only Israel has a covenant relationship with God initiated by the LORD Himself. But Britain has a voluntary national covenant with God through the Coronation Oath, in which the monarch promises on behalf of the nation to uphold godly laws and the Christian religion. We’ve broken this covenant and are under judgment for it, but we’re being given a chance to renew the covenant and get back into right relationship with God as a nation.

Renewing our national covenant with God is an important part of putting the nation back on a right footing with him so that we're ready to take the place that He's assigned to us at the vanguard of His end-time activity. (Renewal of the covenant was one of the things done as part of the reforms Josiah put in place in ancient Judah: see 2 Kings 23:1-3 and 2 Chronicles 34:32-33.)

It's God's heartfelt desire to come to the British Isles with revival fire and healing power. This will only come to pass, however, if we take the opportunities which He's giving us. This means that we must pray: for our nation, for the Church, for our leaders, for Parliament, for government ministers, civil servants and local authorities, for the justice system – for godly laws to be passed and ungodly ones to be repealed, for idols to be torn down and false religions to fall, for the defence of the realm, for the tide of evil in our land to be reversed. We need to respond personally and corporately as the Church, being ready to explain the significance of what is happening to our fellow citizens and let them know how they need to react.

Paul advised Christians in Colosse to "devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should." (Colossians 4:2-4). Redoubled, heartfelt prayer is vital. If we devote ourselves to that, then just as when Jesus healed a paralytic, we will shortly live in a land where "Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said 'We have seen great things today.'" (Luke 5:26).

All praise to the name of our great and mighty God.

Amen