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Discerning The Times

"Of that day and hour no one knows"

In the famous Olivet prophecy of Matthew 24, the disciples asked Christ, *"Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age (v.3)?"* After answering this question in detail, Christ, 33 verses later, added, *"But of that day and hour no one knows, no, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only."*

Does this mean we cannot know the general time of Christ's second coming? Some believe this, and these same people shrug off any need to be concerned with the season or timing of Christ's return. It's pretty clear that almost everyone is not looking for Christ's second coming at the right time. In fact, He will come when most are not looking for Him at all. That will cause so many not to recognize the onset of such an enormous event.

Jesus Christ once criticized the Jewish religious leaders for not being able to discern the signs of the times in which they lived and for not knowing the time of His first coming (Luke 12:54-56). They failed to analyse the time they were living in. It's the same as today. Might we be deserving of that same criticism if we do not note the important signs of our times? We are told by Jesus that we must know the seasons of the prophecies and the end times. When you study the Bible you will discover that God has appointed certain seasons or times in which He fulfils certain aspects of His purpose here on earth. The end time or end of the age is a very definite and appointed season.

Why are so many unable to recognize the arrival of the last days? Jesus Christ foretold the rebirth of Israel in His famous prophecy of the

"fig tree." In Matthew 24, verses 32-34, Christ spoke a parable: *"Now learn this parable from the fig tree; When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So you also, when you see all these things, know that it[He] is near, at the very doors. Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away until all these things are fulfilled."* Christ states that we can know the "**season**" of His second coming but not the day nor the hour. It is God's will that we properly discern the importance of the times we are living in.

This is one of Christ's great prophecies concerning the end of the age and of His second coming. Let me explain. Throughout the Old Testament Scriptures, the illustration of the fig tree has been the symbol for the nation Israel. In this parable Christ draws a spiritual lesson from nature. When the branches of the fig tree become green and tender, you know that summer is near. For 1900 years Israel has been dormant, with no government of its own, no land, no temple, no priesthood – no sign of national life. The Jewish people have been scattered throughout the world. Some 2500 years ago the prophet Ezekiel said this was going to happen (36:17-19). Then in chapter 37 Ezekiel talks about the resuscitation of the nation of Israel and the regathering of scattered Israel from all the nations of the world back to her own land (37:21-22). *"Surely I will take the children of Israel from among the nations, wherever they have gone, and I will gather them from every side and bring them back into their own land (v.21)."*

Then a miracle happened on May 14, 1948, Israel became a recognized nation; actually "born in one day" with its own land, government, currency, stamps, army, etc. Amazingly, 2500 years ago, God had determined that He would regather His people and plant them back in the land He had chosen for them and He promised that it would happen in one day flat. *"Who has ever heard of such a thing? Who has ever seen such things? Can a country be born in a day, or a nation be brought forth in a moment (Isaiah 66:7-8)?"* Never in the history of the world had such a thing happened before but God keeps His word. No other ancient nation ever ceased to exist for a period of centuries and then returned to take its place on the stage of world history. Most nations evolved gradually over the centuries. In the time of the ancient prophecies, no one had ever witnessed a nation being created *"in one day."*

The Jewish people began to return from 70 different nations to the Promised Land after 2000 years of exile. The prophecies of Isaiah and Ezekiel were fulfilled precisely as predicted on May 15, 1948. Spiritually, the nation is still barren and cold; there is no fruit for God. But nationally, we might say that its branches are green and tender. Israel's emergence as a nation means not only that the beginning of the Tribulation is near, but that Christ Himself is near, at the very doors!

The Bible states that certain conditions must exist and specific events must come to pass before Jesus will return. Jesus Himself was clear about this, giving a detailed prophecy of end time settings and events in Matthew 24 and in the book of Revelation. None of these end-time settings and events happened prior to our generation. God's prophetic clock for the end time settings and events started ticking with the miracle of the Jewish people back in their homeland. Clearly, the miracle of the Jewish people back in their homeland after 1900 years is the start of the end-time settings and events which I will discuss in the following chapters of this book.

If Christ's coming to reign is so near, how much more imminent is the Rapture of the church? If we already see shadows of events that must proceed His appearing and glory, how much closer are we to the first phase of His second coming, meeting Him in the air. *"Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord (1 Thess. 4:13-18)."*

After referring to the fig tree, Jesus added, *"Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away until all these things take place (Matt.24:34)."* I believe that generation refers to those individuals born after 1967. Why? After June 11, 1967 when the Israeli forces recaptured the city of Jerusalem in the Six-Day War, God's prophetic clock started ticking. On that day Ezekiel's prophecy of 2500 years ago was fulfilled. I will go into more detail on this subject in another chapter dealing with the nation Israel. I just wanted to show you how close we are to the end of the age as there are no more Bible prophecies to be fulfilled before the appearing of Christ to remove His true church and take it to heaven (Rapture). I truly believe that the Rapture will take place within the next 16 years. Personally, I'm looking forward to the Rapture. I've mentioned to many individuals before that I'm looking forward to the **Upper Taker** (Rapture) and not

the undertaker. God willing, if my health holds out, I'd love to experience the Rapture. What a way to go! Reminds me of the song title "Goodbye Cruel World" by James Darren.

Discerning the times we are living in

We are living in one of the most strategic times in the course of human history. The Bible has much to say about the times of the end of this age. We are living closer to the end of the age than any other generation before us. In fact, the last days or end times is one of the most discussed subjects in Scripture. The Bible speaks more about this period of time than about any other period in human history.

Has the time finally arrived? Now that nearly 2000 years have passed since Christ's first coming, ominous trends in the world today tell some of us that we indeed are presently living in the end times. Our age is replete with many disturbing signs indicating that the age of man's 6000 year government on earth is drawing to a close. We have seen some of the biggest global, political, economical, social and religious changes happening in the past number of years. End time events are beginning to unfold themselves in rapid succession. Question: "Can we understand end time prophetic events today."

God intends that people should be able to discern the signs of the times that indicate what we might expect to happen in the future. They are called in the Scripture the "sign of the times." Our ability to interpret the significance of the things we see developing in the world around us depends on our knowledge of what the future holds in store. That's why God gave us the prophetic Scriptures: *"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16)."*

God is omniscient. He knows every detail of the future, and exactly when and how it will take place. In the prophetic Scriptures He has revealed the events of the future to the extent that it is good for us to know. We do well to discover and give heed to what He has revealed.

Christ angrily rebuked those who were prone to doubt the authenticity of what God has made known through His chosen prophets. He said to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, *"O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken (Luke 24:25)!"*

The apostle Peter was inspired to write to those who are of Christ's church today, *"We also have the prophetic word made sure, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place... for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:19, 21)."* This means that what the prophets wrote was not a concoction of their own ideas and not the result of human imagination, insight, or speculation. They wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In some way which we cannot fully understand, God directed these prophets as to the very words to write, and yet He did not destroy the individuality or style of the writers. This is one of the key verses in the Bible on divine inspiration.

In a day when many are denying the authority of the Scriptures, it is important that we stand firmly for the verbal, plenary inspiration of the inerrant word. By verbal inspiration we mean that the words as originally penned by the 35 or more writers of the Bible were God breathed (see 1 Cor. 2:13). God did not give a general outline or some basic ideas then let the writers phrase them as they wished. The very words they wrote were given by the Holy Spirit.

There are hundreds and hundreds of prophetic examples throughout Scripture that the prophets wrote about that were fulfilled hundreds and thousands of years later. I'll give you one example by the prophet Isaiah whose writings detail Christ's crucifixion 700 years later. This amazing prophecy describes in detail Christ's crucifixion, even though crucifixion wasn't even invented for another 300 years after Isaiah's death. The only way Isaiah could write about Christ's crucifixion was that the Spirit of God revealed it to him. The very words Isaiah wrote were given by the Holy Spirit.

To discern the importance of our role and of the hour we are living in is imperative if we are to fulfill our redemptive calling and reach the lost world. In Matthew 16:3, Jesus criticized the religious leaders for their inability to discern God's actions and timing in their generation.

The spiritual leaders of Israel, the Pharisees and Sadducees, came to Jesus in order to tempt (test) Him to show them a sign from heaven. They wanted to see Jesus attempt to perform a miracle. This would then strengthen their case against Jesus, proving that He is not who He claimed to be. Their hearts were hard and they expected Him to fail in

giving them a sign from heaven. They had made up their minds not to believe. If you give someone a test, your goal is not to learn anything from the person or situation, and this was their attitude. They did not want to learn anything from Jesus; neither did they want to see the truth. Even though Jesus had already performed a large number of miracles such as multiplying the bread and fish to feed 5000 on one occasion and feeding 4000 on another occasion, opening blind eyes, healing the lame and sick, raising people from the dead and driving out many demons from people, yet their hearts remained untouched by this and they did not consider the signs as authoritative enough.

The point is this: they did not really want to see a miracle; they simply wanted to discredit Jesus and gather evidence against Him. Because of the hardness of their hearts and their disbelief, the religious leaders were unable to properly discern the times they were living in. Because they refused to look at Jesus, they were unable to look at anything else in the right way. They were spiritually blind. They failed to recognize and discern the purposes of God because their hearts were far from God. They embraced a form of religion and pronounced it with their lips, but their hearts were cold and and focused in the wrong place.

The world is filled with examples of spiritually blind people. There are two types of spiritually blind people. Firstly, there are those that will always remain blind and will never be able to see spiritually because they will never make the decision to accept the gift of spiritual life from Jesus. Secondly, there are those who are blind, but their blindness is not permanent. Their spiritual blindness will be cured because they choose Christ. The Lord is about to do unprecedented things in unprecedented ways, and if we do not truly know Him we might become offended by what He is about to do. We need discernment and understanding to rightly judge the coming of the end of the age. To dwell and operate from within His presence forms part of our destiny. It is God's will that we properly discern the importance of the hour (times) we are living in.

Jesus' response to their request for a miracle – for a sign

Jesus responded to their request for a sign by exposing the actual problem, namely their unbelief and inability to discern the times. God had already given the signs, but they did not see them. Their spiritual discernment was erroneous and nonexistent because their

hearts were hard. He replied to them, *"When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red; 'and in the morning, 'there'll be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.' "Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times (Matt. 16:3)."* Then just to emphasize the point again Jesus repeats the warning in the book of Luke. He said, God's people who failed to discern the time of such an important event are hypocrites (12:54, 55, 56).

Here Jesus Christ emphasized how important it is to understand the significance of the times we live in. He told the religious leaders that they were good at reading the weather signs in the sky but they couldn't read the obvious signs of their times. Can we today read the obvious signs of our times?

Jesus is telling us that we should know the times of the season. We can see from Scripture that Jesus rebuked the religious leaders of His day for not understanding the times that they were living in, for not knowing the time of His first coming. If He called these people **hypocrites** and expected them to understand the times that they were living in and what they were going through prophetically at the time, what does He expect of our generation today and the times that we are living in? Are we hypocrites for not heeding Bible prophecy pertaining to the end times?

According to Scripture, religious leaders failed to analyse the time they were living in. It's the same today: people fail to see the signs of the end times and Christ's second coming. We are told by Jesus that we must know the seasons of the prophecies and the end times. Jesus couldn't make this any clearer to us today. All the Scriptural warning signs for us today must be fulfilled before Christ's return. To discern the times is an important command of Christ. It is the spiritual responsibility for children of God to discern the times they are living in.

What does "discern" mean?

The religious leaders could not discern the "spiritual weather" of their time. They failed to separate thoroughly the activities of their day and did not recognize that the Messiah was standing in their midst. They could not distinguish between everyday activities and those which

were truly important and that demanded their full attention, namely Jesus. The whole of the Hebrew Scriptures pointed towards Jesus, yet they missed the time of His visitation because their focus was in the wrong place. Because they did not believe, they could not see.

We are all familiar with the saying, "seeing is believing." Well, when it comes to the kingdom of God it works the other way around, "we see because we believe." Faith causes our spiritual eyes to see that which is important, to discern the purposes of God in our generation. As His people, we need to look at God's signs and adjust our lives accordingly, without rejecting His signs and wanting God to come up with the signs we want to see before we believe. Even today there are many people who simply refuse to believe. They want proof that God is who He says He is but, ironically, even if God reveals Himself to some of them, they would still choose not to believe.

There are at least 35 miracles of Jesus mentioned in the Scriptures. At His first sermon to His followers, Jesus miraculously fed 5000 men and their families from five loaves of bread and two fish. At His second sermon Jesus fed 4000 followers from seven loaves of bread and a few fish. After the crowd were all were fed, the disciples were still able to gather up 12 baskets of loaves that were left over – nothing was wasted. There were numerous miracles witnessed of Christ healing the sick, lame, blind and deaf. Christ walking on water and His control over nature by miraculously calming a furious storm and saving the crew were witnessed by the disciples. On two different occasions, two children were miraculously raised from the dead in front of their parents and other witnesses.

Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead is, arguably, the most predominant public miracle of Jesus' earthly ministry. Historically, it marked a significant turning point in His ministry. In this miracle Jesus manifested His divine power and authority over life and death. This event is an indication of Christ's power and deity. Jesus deliberately delayed His arrival at Lazarus' home for a few days, so that Lazarus would have died and been buried before He arrived. In Bethany, which was close to Jerusalem, Christ exposed Himself to the Jewish authorities.

Before Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb, He told the crowd what He was doing and why. Jesus said it was for the benefit of the

unbelievers among them. The people were astonished seeing Lazarus come out of the tomb in funeral wraps. After seeing this, the religious leaders were extremely furious. It is significant to note that it was this marvellous sign of the raising of Lazarus which led the Pharisees and the chief priests to conspire together and devise a plan to kill Jesus. They said, *"What should we do? For this Man works many signs. If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation (John 11:47-48)."*

The most interesting thing about this very public miracle is that even though Lazarus had been dead four days and was already decomposing, some of the people still refused to believe: even though many did. So, solid proof of a miracle will not convince some individuals if they simply refuse to believe. It is also impossible to convince anyone of God's existence if they refuse to believe no matter what evidence is presented.

And this is exactly what took place with the religious authority. Even though all these miracles were witnessed by the multitude, the religious leaders rejected God's miraculous signs. Instead, they wanted to choose a sign from heaven, but none was given them except the *"sign of Jonah."*

Jesus told the religious leaders who wanted a sign, *"For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (Matthew 12:40)."* Earlier, Jesus had likewise announced that His resurrection would come three days after His death (John 2:19). Jonah's miraculous survival after being in the belly of the whale for three days and three nights was a powerful sign that Jonah's message to Nineveh was from God (Jonah 1:17; Luke 11:30). By the sign of Jonah, Jesus predicted in advance that He would be entombed *"in the heart of the earth"* for three days and three nights before miraculously coming out of the tomb alive. This miraculous sign would prove that He too was sent by God. After His resurrection, Christ appeared to the apostles and over 500 other witnesses (1 Cor. 15:6).

I was just going to close this chapter with the sign of Jonah but before I go any further with this book, it might be a good time to stop here and finish off this chapter by telling you who Jesus is. A lot of people have heard about this historic figure called Jesus but have no idea who

He really is or what the Scriptures say about Him.

Who is Jesus?

This is a very important question: Who is Jesus? I was once asked this question many years ago and I remember replying at the time saying that Jesus was "God in the flesh." If asked this question today I would answer the same. Jesus is part of the Godhead. The Bible teaches that there is one God and that there are three distinct Persons in the Godhead – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All three of these Persons are God. Not three gods but a God who manifests Himself as Father, as Son, and as Holy Spirit.

So many people I know who take a stab at religion have a view of God as someone distant and unapproachable, someone who cannot be reached or who cares little about the mundane things that happen on this earth. But the God of the Bible is "Immanuel" or God with us. God coming down to be one of us; literally, God walking around in the body and Person of Jesus Christ! The deity of Jesus Christ is an undeniable truth from the Bible. He is God in man. He is the Son of God and He is God, the Son. As the Son of God, He is equal to God. It is the truth that we will probably never really comprehend fully with our finite minds until we get to heaven.

According to Scripture, the prophet Isaiah said 700 years earlier that God would give us a sign: *"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14)."* Immanuel translated means *"God with us."* When God chose to reveal Himself, He did so through a human body, through that of a virgin and not of the sinful seed of man.

The apostle John had an eye of an eagle and was a real stickler for detail. He couldn't have made it more clear than this when he spoke of who Jesus was. Here is what John said: *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him and without Him nothing was made that was made. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:1-3, 10, 11, 14)."*

John begins his gospel by speaking about the Word, but he does not explain at first who or what the Word is. A word is a unit of speech which we express ourselves to others. But John is not writing about speech but rather about a Person. That Person is the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God. God has fully expressed Himself to mankind in the Person of the Lord Jesus. By coming into the world, Christ has perfectly revealed to us what God is like. Christ left his royal robes of heaven and came down to earth to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. By dying for us on the cross, He has told us how much God loves us. Thus Christ is God's living Word to man, the expression of God's thoughts.

Let me explain:

"He was in the beginning with God (v.2)," tells us that He did not become a person for the first time as that babe in Bethlehem. Nor did He somehow become a god after His resurrection, as some teach today. He is God from all eternity.

"All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made (v.3)," tells us that He Himself was not a created being: rather He was the Creator of all things. This includes mankind, the animals, the heavenly planets, the angels – all things visible and invisible. There can be no possible exception. If a thing was made, He made it. As Creator, He is, of course, superior to anything He has created.

All three persons of the Godhead were involved in the work of creation: *"God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1)" "The Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters (Genesis 1:2)." "All things were created through Him [Christ] and for Him (Colossians 1:16b)."*

In summary, the most significant fact in history can be summed up in four words: Jesus Christ is God! The great declaration of the Bible is that God in human flesh was born in Bethlehem. It was God in the person of Jesus Christ who astonished the people of His day with His miracles and amazed them with His teaching. It was God who lived a perfect life and then allowed Himself to be put to death on a Roman cross for humanity's sin. It was God who broke the bonds of death three days after He died and came out of the grave alive. The deity of

Jesus – the fact that He was God in human form, is the bottom line of the believer's faith. Thank Jesus for coming to explain God fully to us.

Now that I've shown you from Scripture who Jesus is, I want to close this chapter by quoting verse 12 of John: "*But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.*" This verse tells us clearly how we can become children of God. It is not by good works or trying one's best to be good, and it's not by church membership. It's not about buildings, rules, priests, ceremonies or traditions. It's all about a relationship and not a religion, by asking Christ to come into our hearts and receiving Him as Lord and Saviour and very best friend. You are saved by believing in His Name and believing in the good news of the gospel: His birth, death and resurrection.

[Please request my 264 page book called *Death and God*; where everything is explained in easy-to-read detail. I want to send it at no cost to you. You have everything to gain (eternity) and nothing to lose.]