

How to Study the Bible – Week 5 – The Time Factor – Bible Study Helps

Title: What Time Is It?

Understanding the Divisions of Biblical History

Sermon Summary: This sermon explores the critical importance of recognizing the time periods, or dispensations, in which biblical truth was given in order to properly interpret and apply Scripture. Drawing from Hebrews 1:1-3, the sermon establishes that God has spoken at different times and in different ways throughout human history. Using 2 Timothy 2:15 as a foundational text, the sermon emphasizes the necessity of rightly dividing the Word of Truth, demonstrating that a statement in the Bible can be absolutely true and yet be wrongly applied if its proper time period and audience are ignored. The sermon walks through seven major dispensations of biblical history, explains the technical distinction between the Old and New Testaments, and exposes how most false doctrine arises from taking biblical truth out of its proper historical and prophetic context.

Key Points:

- God has spoken at separate and distinct times and in different ways throughout human history, as established in Hebrews 1:1-3
- The word "dispensation" appears four times in Scripture and refers to a period of time in which God dispenses His truth in a particular way to particular people
- There are seven major dispensations: Edenic, Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, the Church Age, and the Millennial reign of Christ
- The New Testament technically begins at the death of Jesus Christ, not at Matthew 1:1, because a testament only takes effect upon the death of the one who made it, as described in Hebrews 9
- The Gospels function as transitional books between the Old and New Testaments
- Rightly dividing the Word requires asking questions of any passage such as: What is the context, who is the audience, and what time period does it belong to?
- Five rules of proper division must be followed: do not take truth from one part of the past and apply it to another part of the past; do not take truth from the past and apply it to the present; do not take truth from the present and apply it to the past; do not take truth from the future and apply it to the present; do not take truth from the future and misplace it within another part of the future
- Most heresy and false doctrine results from violating these rules of proper division
- The ministry of the Holy Spirit differs between the Old Testament, where He came upon believers temporarily, and the Church Age, where He permanently indwells and seals believers
- The rapture of the church is a distinct future event that precedes the tribulation period and is clearly supported when Scripture is rightly divided

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Scripture Reference:

- Hebrews 1:1-3, which describes God speaking through the prophets in times past and then through His Son
- 2 Timothy 2:15, the call to study and rightly divide the Word of Truth
- 1 Corinthians 9:16-17, Paul describing the dispensation of the gospel committed to him
- Ephesians 1:10, referencing the dispensation of the fullness of times
- Ephesians 3:2, Paul describing the dispensation of grace given to him for the Gentiles
- Colossians 1:25, Paul describing his stewardship of the dispensation of God for the Gentiles
- Hebrews 9:11-17, explaining that a testament only takes effect upon the death of the testator
- Matthew 12:30-32, the passage on blasphemy against the Holy Ghost
- Isaiah 9:6-7, the prophecy spanning both the birth and the millennial reign of Christ
- Luke 1:30 and following, the angel's announcement to Mary spanning the birth, reign, and eternal kingdom of Christ

Stories:

- The sermon used the illustration of the word string "GODISNOWHERE," which can be divided to read either "God is nowhere" or "God is now here," demonstrating that how one divides a text dramatically changes its meaning
- The sermon recalled the conversion experience and early ignorance of Scripture, using it to illustrate how biblical knowledge grows line upon line over time
- The illustration of a last will and testament was used to explain Hebrews 9, noting that a will has no legal force until the one who wrote it has died, which is why the New Testament only takes effect at the death of Christ – the cross
- The tearing of the temple veil at the crucifixion was referenced as a vivid historical moment in which the priests attempted to repair what Jesus Christ had fulfilled and done away with
- The gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh brought to Jesus were briefly discussed to illustrate the practical and historical richness found in studying biblical context and their practical value to us
- The sermon referenced the account of Enoch in Genesis 5 as an example of one man who walked with God while the surrounding generation largely did not, illustrating that people in any dispensation had the same or similar information but chose different responses to God

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Discipleship Questions

Hebrews 1:1-2 describes God speaking through prophets in the past and then through His Son -- how does understanding this progression change the way you approach reading both the Old and New Testaments?

The sermon describes God as existing outside of time and dispensing truth gradually throughout human history -- how does this perspective deepen your appreciation for the specific portion of Scripture and truth that has been given to the church age?

If a statement in the Bible can be absolutely true and still be wrongly applied when taken out of its proper time and context, what habits or disciplines can you develop to ensure you are handling Scripture responsibly?

The sermon notes that most people who get saved start with very little biblical knowledge and grow over time through study -- what has your own journey of growing in the knowledge of God looked like, and where do you sense God calling you to go deeper?

Considering that the New Testament technically begins with the death of Jesus Christ, how does understanding the cross as the dividing line between covenants reshape the way you read the Gospels?

The sermon explains that the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit is a distinct blessing of the church age dispensation -- how should this reality affect the way believers live and make decisions day to day?

Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 2:15 that believers must rightly divide the word of truth -- in what practical ways can a local church create a culture where members are equipped to do this rather than remaining dependent on others to interpret Scripture for them?

The sermon argues that most false doctrine and heresy results from truth being taken out of its proper place in the biblical timeline -- can you think of a teaching you have encountered that might fall into this category, and how would the dispensational framework help evaluate it?

The sermon connects the study of biblical history to the larger story of God working through time against the opposition of the devil -- how does viewing all of history through this lens change the way you engage with current events and world news?

Given that the sermon emphasizes the church age may be drawing to a close and that Jesus could return at any time, what specific changes in priorities or relationships does that urgency call you to make in your own life?

Small Group Guide: What Time Is It?

Based on the Sermon on Biblical Dispensations and Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

Overview

This session explores how God has spoken and worked throughout human history in separate and distinct times and ways, and why understanding the time period and context of a Bible passage is essential to interpreting it correctly. The central passage for this study is 2 Timothy 2:15, which calls believers to be workmen who rightly divide the word of truth.

Key Takeaways

- 1. The Bible Has Divisions** God did not reveal all truth at once. He dispensed His truth progressively throughout human history, through different people, at different times, and in different ways. Hebrews 1:1-2 summarizes this clearly, noting that God spoke through the prophets in times past and has now spoken through His Son.
- 2. The Word "Dispensation" Is a Bible Word** Appearing four times in Scripture (1 Corinthians 9:17, Ephesians 1:10, Ephesians 3:2, Colossians 1:25), a dispensation refers to a period of time in which God administers His truth in a particular way. Understanding this concept helps believers avoid misapplying Scripture.
- 3. The New Testament Technically Begins at the Cross** Hebrews 9:16-17 teaches that a testament only goes into effect after the death of the one who made it. This means the Gospels function as transitional books, and the church age formally begins with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- 4. Most False Doctrine Is Truth Taken Out of Its Proper Time** Cults and false teachers frequently take a verse that is true in its original context and misapply it to a different time period, people group, or situation. Knowing what time it is in Scripture is a powerful defense against this kind of error.
- 5. Three Questions Every Bible Student Should Ask**
 - What is the context?
 - Who is this written to?
 - What time period does this belong to?

Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before this study, how did you think about the Bible in terms of different time periods or eras? Did you tend to read all of Scripture as equally and directly applicable to your life today? Why or why not?

Understanding the Text

1. Hebrews 1:1-2 describes God speaking at various times and in various ways. What does it mean to you that God chose to reveal His truth gradually over thousands of years rather than all at once? What does that tell you about His character and His relationship with humanity?
2. The sermon used the illustration of a dispenser to explain the word dispensation. In your own words, how would you explain a biblical dispensation to someone who had never heard the term?
3. Read 2 Timothy 2:15. The word "dividing" carries the idea of cutting straight. Why do you think Paul used that kind of language to describe how we should handle Scripture? What happens when Scripture is not handled carefully?
4. The sermon walked through seven major dispensations in biblical history. Which one surprised you most or gave you new insight into how God has worked throughout history? Why?
5. Hebrews 9:16-17 teaches that a testament only takes effect after the death of the one who made it. How does understanding that the New Testament technically begins at the cross change the way you read the Gospels?

Going Deeper

6. The sermon pointed out that in Matthew 12:31-32, the context of Jesus addressing the religious leaders who called Him satanically motivated is essential to understanding what He meant by blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. How does knowing the people factor and the time factor bring clarity to that difficult passage? Have you ever wrestled with that verse personally?
7. Isaiah 9:6-7 contains what appears to be a seamless description of the Messiah, yet the sermon noted that more than 2,000 years of history separate verse 6 from the fullness of verse 7. How does this change the way you read Old Testament prophecy?
8. The sermon identified five rules for proper division of Scripture. Which of the five do you think is most commonly violated in the churches or teachings you have encountered? Can you think of a specific example?
9. The sermon mentioned that Jesus Christ does not change, but that God's program and administration have changed at distinct points in history. How do you hold those two truths together? Why is it important not to confuse them?

Personal Reflection

10. The sermon compared learning the Bible over time to how a child grows in knowledge, noting that there are no shortcuts. Where are you in that process personally? What has been the most significant season of growth in your understanding of Scripture, and what contributed to it?
 11. Think about a verse or passage you have heard misused or taken out of context. Using the three questions from this study (context, people, time), how would you now approach that passage differently?
 12. The sermon closed with a reminder that most heresy is truth placed out of its proper time. How does this motivate you to study the Bible more carefully and consistently? What is one practical step you can take this week toward deeper Bible study?
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Practical Applications

For Individual Study

- Obtain a Bible that includes reference dates, such as those using Usher's chronology, and begin paying attention to the historical timeframe of passages you read.
- When you encounter a difficult or confusing verse this week, write it down and practice asking the three questions: What is the context? Who is this written to? What time period is this?
- Read through the four dispensation verses (1 Corinthians 9:17, Ephesians 1:10, Ephesians 3:2, Colossians 1:25) and write a brief summary of what each one teaches about how God has administered His truth.

For the Group

- As a group, select one commonly misused passage and walk through it together using the context, people, and time framework. Discuss how proper division changes or clarifies its meaning.
- Commit together to memorizing 2 Timothy 2:15 this week. Discuss what it would look like for each group member to be a workman who is not ashamed in their handling of Scripture.

For Outreach

- The sermon noted that false doctrine often takes truth out of its proper time and place. Think of someone in your life who holds to a teaching that misapplies Scripture in this way. Pray for that person this week and ask God for an opportunity to gently and graciously share a more accurate understanding of the passage in question.
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Closing Prayer Points

- Pray for a deeper love for Scripture and a commitment to study it carefully.
- Pray for those in false religious systems who are being misled by Scripture taken out of context.
- Pray for wisdom and boldness to rightly divide the word of truth in conversations with others.
- Thank God for the gift of His written Word and for the Holy Spirit who guides believers into all truth.

5-Day Bible Reading and Devotional Guide

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth: Understanding God's Unfolding Story

Day 1: God Speaks — And Has Always Spoken

Reading: Hebrews 1:1-3

Devotional: God has never been silent. From the garden of Eden to the prophets to the person of Jesus Christ, He has been speaking, revealing, and drawing people to Himself. The opening of Hebrews reminds us that the same God who whispered truth to the patriarchs ultimately sent His Son as the fullest and final word. Every page of Scripture is a record of a God who refuses to leave His people without direction. As you open your Bible today, receive it not as an ancient document but as the living voice of a God who is still speaking directly to you.

Personal Reflection: In what areas of your life have you been slow to listen to what God has already clearly spoken?

Practical Application: Set aside ten minutes today to read slowly, asking God to speak to you through what you read rather than rushing to finish.

Day 2: Studying to Know Him Deeper

Reading: 2 Timothy 2:14-16

Devotional: Paul's charge to Timothy carries weight precisely because it came from a man near death who had spent his entire Christian life laboring in the Word. To study is not merely an academic exercise — it is an act of devotion. Rightly dividing the Word of Truth means handling it with care, precision, and reverence. Many believers settle for a surface-level familiarity with Scripture, never pressing deeper into its riches. But God rewards those who diligently seek Him through His Word. The workman who is unashamed is not the one who knows the most facts, but the one who has been genuinely transformed by them.

Personal Reflection: Are you approaching Bible study as a duty to complete or as a relationship to cultivate?

Practical Application: Identify one book of the Bible you have never read and commit to beginning it this week, reading it with a notebook nearby to record what God reveals.

Day 3: Faith Before the Law — The God of Abraham

Reading: Genesis 15:1-6; Galatians 3:6-9

Devotional: Abraham had no law, no temple, no priesthood, and no written Scripture. What he had was a word from God and the faith to believe it. God counted that faith as righteousness. This truth, buried in Genesis and unpacked by Paul in Galatians, dismantles every system of religion that attempts to earn God's favor through human effort. Salvation has always been by faith. The law was never the means of right standing before God — it was a mirror revealing the need for a Savior. If Abraham was justified by believing God, then the ground at the foot of the cross is level for every person who has ever lived.

Personal Reflection: Are there areas where you are still trying to earn what God has already freely given through Christ?

Practical Application: Write down three things you tend to rely on besides Christ for your sense of spiritual standing, and surrender each one to God in prayer today.

Day 4: The Cross Changes Everything

Reading: Hebrews 9:11-17; Romans 8:1-4

Devotional: The tearing of the temple veil was not an accident — it was a declaration. Every sacrifice, every ritual, every drop of animal blood had been pointing forward to the moment when Jesus Christ would offer Himself as the final and sufficient payment for sin. The New Testament did not begin with a page turn in a printed Bible. It began with the death of the testator, Jesus Christ, whose blood ratified a covenant of grace that no religious system could ever produce. You are not saved by what you do. You are saved by what He did. The cross is not a starting point to move beyond — it is the center of everything.

Personal Reflection: How often do you return in your thinking and worship to the cross as the foundation of your entire standing before God?

Practical Application: Spend time today meditating on one specific aspect of what Christ accomplished at the cross, and thank God for it in specific, unhurried prayer.

Day 5: Living in the Right Time — The Church Age and the Hope Ahead

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Ephesians 1:9-14

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Devotional: You were born into a specific moment in God's unfolding story, and that moment is extraordinary. The church age is the dispensation of grace, sealed by the Holy Spirit, marked by the indwelling presence of God in every believer, and pointed toward the return of Jesus Christ. You are not waiting for God to show up — He already lives within you. And you are not waiting for history to make sense — it already has a guaranteed conclusion. The rapture is not a theological footnote. It is the living hope of every believer, the anchor that keeps the soul steady in an unstable world. Live today like it matters eternally, because it does.

Personal Reflection: Does the reality of Christ's return shape the way you spend your time, your words, and your priorities each day?

Practical Application: Share the hope of the gospel with one person this week, remembering that the time for that opportunity is finite and the stakes are eternal.