

How Is It That You Can't Interpret The times?

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for the gift of the Lord Jesus on that first Christmas. And Father, we come to teaching like this and we find it challenging and difficult to understand.

Perhaps even harder to accept. So we pray that your spirit will be with us now. To give us ears able to hear, heads that will understand and hearts that are willing to change and follow you.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Well, Jesus talks in this passage, doesn't he, about interpreting the signs. We're all people who interpret the signs. I think I have a sign with me actually.

I meant to bring one. Let me just check if I can find it in here. Here was my sign from the recent news. People see this in the news.

This has been a sign for chocolate lovers everywhere. Well, maybe even a scandal. Toblerone gate in the news. If you're used to buying your Toblerone, they've made the spaces bigger between the pieces.

[1 : 11] Here's a picture of the old and the new. One thing I loved about that was just how obvious it is. Because sometimes with products, they try and save costs, don't they?

They'll sort of make the whole pack smaller in the hope you won't actually notice. I think they've been doing that to Mars bars for years. But people tell me it's that I've grown bigger.

I'm very suspicious about that. There was even the story, wasn't there, about, well, you might remember years ago, there was the story of a, I don't know whether this is true, but there was a, it was said that a certain pizza chain had paid to have all their crockery replaced with smaller plates so that they could make all the pizzas smaller without people realizing.

I don't know whether that's true. And I won't say which the chain was. But I just, with Toblerone, they've just gone for it. You know, you buy a Toblerone, there's bigger spaces. It's pretty obvious what's going on.

And, you know, you buy it at the airport, because that's where we all buy Toblerone, and you find these gaps, and you think, oh, maybe this is a sign of the times. Things are changing. And this is what John Prescott pointed out.

[2 : 26] He tweeted this picture and said, Brexit just got real. This is when it's just got serious for us all. And we also saw this with Marmite, didn't we, and this dispute Unilever and Tesco, and the Marmite started disappearing from the shelves.

And what we do is we respond to what we see. So we might see what's going on, and we might stock up on Marmite, or we might think, I'm going to book my holiday next year in the UK, because the pound's not looking very strong with what's going on with Toblerone and Marmite.

So I'm going to react to that, because I'm interpreting it as a sign of what's going on in the wider world. And we've seen the signs of the US election, and people comment on that, don't they?

And they say, what does this election result tell us about division among the electorate in America? Perhaps the same is true here. What does it tell us about whether people are feeling angry, and why are people feeling disengaged?

And all sorts of implications for the British political scene. Now, in Luke chapter 12, Jesus turns to the crowd, and he rebukes them for not being able to understand the times.

[3 : 44] And have you noticed that? It's worth just imagining that you're in the crowd, and you're not one of the disciples. So what you hear, actually, is just what's in verse 54. He said to the crowd, when you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, it's going to rain, and it does.

He wasn't even in Glasgow. We're used to that, aren't we? Perhaps less used to the next bit. And when the south wind blows, you say, it's going to be hot. And it is. And then how shocking, verse 56.

Hypocrites. You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?

So words of really serious warning there, aren't they? And for a while now in Luke, in Luke's gospel, the crowd hasn't had a lot to go on, actually. So if you just look back at the start of chapter 12, back over the page, we've been in this series in Luke.

This is the last one in our series. The beginning of chapter 12. Why has he done that?

[5 : 08] Well, it's because by now in Luke's gospel, the religious authorities have made up their minds to reject Jesus. He's given them ample opportunity to recognize who he is as their promised rescuing king and turn to him.

And they've stubbornheartedly refused to do that. And so what he says to his followers is, be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

So he's working with his disciples. Back over the page, it looks as though it was like a watershed moment in chapter 11. In verse 37, he goes to dinner with some Pharisees.

They question him for not keeping their traditions. And then he pronounces a series of woes upon them. And from then on, he's now speaking mainly to the disciples.

He does speak to the crowd in verse 13 of chapter 12. He tells them a parable about a rich man who's not rich towards God and is condemned to be a fool.

[6 : 12] And he says in verse 21, this is how it will be for everyone who stores up things for themselves but is not rich towards God. And then he goes back to teaching the disciples again.

So it's worth thinking, how do you get to understand the times? He shouts to the crowd. He rebukes them for not being able to understand the times. How do you get to understand them properly?

All you have to do is stay with Jesus. If you'll follow him, he will explain everything to you. And anyone can follow him.

You just step in from the crowd to Jesus. You listen to him, trust him, and you'll understand the times. And that's really important. It's really important because sometimes we don't understand what's going to happen because we haven't looked at the right things.

That's true of the weather, isn't it, actually? You can go out in Glasgow and think, it's not going to rain. It feels warm. It feels dry. And not look properly and miss that there's some massive cloud coming that means you should have worn something waterproof.

[7 : 20] You have to look at the right things. Now, what the Pharisees weren't doing and what the crowd were in danger of not doing was looking at Jesus. They needed to look at him. But because they weren't seeing his work and hearing his words and using that as a sign, they didn't understand the times they lived in.

It's a bit like with the Titanic. We saw this on the movie Titanic, but it's well known that at the time that the Titanic had hit the iceberg, in the immediate aftermath of that, after the jolt, people were still enjoying themselves on board.

They were having a party. There was a party for the third-class passengers. There was one for the first-class passengers. People just carried on as normal. They didn't understand what was going on underneath the deck in terms of having hit an iceberg and be sinking because they didn't look at the right evidence.

And what Jesus says about the times so that we'll understand is not easy. It's very sobering. So our first point about the times is it's a time of impending fire.

Just have a look at verse 49 of chapter 12 again. I have come to bring fire on the earth, Jesus says, and how I wish it were already kindled.

[8 : 41] What does he mean? Well, first of all, fire is a symbol of judgment in the Bible. And in Luke chapter 3, John the Baptist said this. I think it might even be worth turning back to it.

So I'm doing a bit of flicking around today. But if you just turn back to Luke chapter 3 so that we see how fire is to be understood in Luke.

In verse 16, John says this on page 1 or 2 now. Luke 3, 16. John the Baptist says, I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I'm not worthy to untie.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. Now, I've always, well, I tended to read that thinking the fire is the Holy Spirit. But I don't think that's right.

Because if you just look at the next sentence, he says, His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

[9 : 45] Seems very clear what the fire is. It's a fire of judgment. So if Jesus really is performing miracles, if you think that's true of Jesus, that he performed miracles, and if Jesus really is urging people to trust him, which is what we're seeing in Luke's gospel, then here is evidence that God's promised king has arrived on the scene and he's come to conquer.

But that means that the fire of his judgment is coming. And did you see what Jesus said about that? He said, How I wish it were already kindled.

Now, there is a tension here in Jesus' teaching. Because in the very next chapter, in Luke 13, he mourns for Jerusalem, for the people of Jerusalem, that they won't turn to him.

So he longs not to have to judge people. He longs for people to turn to him. He says of Jerusalem in Luke 13, How often I've longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.

If you're here and you're not yet a Christian, that's an expression from Jesus of the emotional longing that he has for you, that you would put your trust in him.

[11 : 00] And yet at the same time, there is a sense in which Jesus longs to judge. And that's because, when you think about it, we all long for justice.

So we long for there to be a judgment on the world. It's a theme in films all the time. I've got an example from quite a while back now, from the film Cold Mountain.

I don't know whether you remember the film, but it's in the American Civil War, the movie, and it was set in the South, and most of the men had gone off to fight during the Civil War.

And it left this situation where there was anarchy in the communities, and they were being kind of ruled by sheriffs that became tyrants among the people, because there weren't the men around to say, well, you can't do that.

They were all off fighting. And so they were taking advantage of their authority, and they made this rule that if you look after a deserter, the penalty is death, and the land that you own goes to the sheriff.

[12 : 02] And in the film, the sheriff, Captain Teague, finds that the characters played by Nicole Kidman and René Zellweger, he finds that they've given a court to a deserter who was sleeping in the cold.

And Nicole Kidman, in desperation, says to him as he wants to kill them for having given a court to this man, and she says, there will be a reckoning. When this war is over, there will be a reckoning.

And the sheriff just says, reckoning? The reckoning's for your world. It's not mine. And it's gut-wrenching to watch, because you see that this woman is longing for the war to be over, and men like that to be brought to justice.

But she has no way of knowing whether it will happen. And then later in the film, Natalie Portman, who's in the film, takes in a deserter, played by Jude Law, and he's kind of hiding in the house, and a sheriff arrives, well, three of them arrive, and they put her baby on the floor, and they threaten to kill the baby unless she'll tell them where her pig is so they can take the pig and eat it.

And she knows she'll starve without that. In the end, she tells them, and then they take her inside to rape her. And in the film, because Jude Law is there, the character played by him, the deserter, he comes out and he attacks this sheriff.

[13 : 20] And he actually, it's interesting, he kills the sheriff. And the way the film is poised, you're pleased. Now, I'm not saying it's right that he kills him, but morally, you're so longing for justice in the movie that you're just so glad somebody has stepped in to stop the appalling injustice that's going on.

And it's true of us in the world. We yearn for justice. And the truth is, that kind of injustice is going on all over the world today. In fact, it's often what people see in the world and challenge God about.

They say, where is God if that can be happening? The Islamic State have been crucifying children who won't renounce their faith in Jesus.

Of course, we've seen in Syria that relief workers have been killed in the conflict there. And what we're learning here is that Jesus is far more concerned about that than even we are.

He's come to set the world on fire and he wishes that he could do it now. He wished 2,000 years ago that he could just bring justice and put things right.

[14 : 37] Why fire? Why that picture? It's worth thinking. It's because fire cleanses things that last. At last. So last week, I went out for a run and I came back in from my run and I thought, oh, I'll just do something on the computer.

And then I was on the computer and I turned around and I remembered I hadn't taken my trainers off. So I looked back at the carpet and it was filthy from bringing in the mud from the run. Annoying. But I'd never thought for a moment, oh well, I'll set fire to the carpet.

Okay? Because the carpet will not survive that. All right? But precious metal will. If you've got precious metal that needs refining, use fire.

And the metal lasts. And it's just a picture because the judgment Jesus Christ promises he's going to bring to our world is going to burn away everything that's wrong with the world and refine everything that's right.

All the sin, the injustice, the suffering, the sorrow, the sickness and death, that will be burnt away. And his people will be transformed and the world around us will be made new.

[15 : 45] And he's longing for that day. We should be longing for that too. What we mustn't do is forget that that's what's coming.

For we are surrounded by people who don't think it's coming and live every day as though the world is just going to carry on as it has already for a long time.

So Jesus shouts to us, interpret the times. Look at him to interpret Glasgow in 2016 and know we live in a time of impending fire.

And then Jesus brings out two implications of that. So our second point about the times, it's a time of division. It's an extraordinary passage to get to just before Christmas, isn't it?

We're approaching Christmas and we're going to be celebrating Jesus coming as Prince of Peace and the angels, as they met the shepherds, promised that it was, there was a time of glory coming and on earth peace and goodwill to all on whom God's favor rests.

[16 : 57] So verse 51 isn't easy, is it? Just have a look at verse 51. Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on, there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three.

They will be divided father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

As Jesus says that, he's actually echoing a prophecy from the Old Testament. A prophet, Micah, described the behavior of society like that as a sign of how bad things have got in the world.

And Jesus is saying, he will be the cause of that kind of division. Why? Because Jesus demands that he take center stage in your life.

For people who turn to him, he is the only hope for unity in our world. He takes people from all different backgrounds, and we see some of that even in our own church here at St. Silas, that we are a bunch of people who could never get on with each other if it wasn't for what Jesus has done for us.

[18 : 11] And he unites people like us together in the church. But he also creates division between those who will accept him and love him as their rescuer and king and people who are deeply offended by him because of what he says.

You know, we are looking at Mark's gospel in Roots midweek at the moment. Our Roots Bible study is here in the hall. And we've got through the first few chapters. And on Wednesday, we were just saying to our groups, as our groups, what's kind of struck you so far?

And one of the guys in our group said, reading Mark's gospel again like this, I just never really thought before how provocative Jesus really is. And you see that as you read about him and see the real Jesus.

In our series here, in Luke's gospel on Sunday evenings, we've heard Jesus say, of himself, I'm greater than the great prophet Jonah. I'm greater than the wise king Solomon.

He said, the devil is powerful and I'm the only strong man who can overpower him. At Martha and Mary's house, he said, only one thing is needed.

[19 : 19] Listen to me. It's extraordinary that he says those things about himself. And yet he has this incredible character that goes with those claims that makes you think, it must be true.

He really does have this authority. We see that kind of division today about Jesus. Think of a Muslim girl I got to know in Lancashire. She, as a teenager, was at a school where she'd met a Christian and become a friend of a Christian girl.

So she got a Bible off her and her family found the Bible hidden in her room and the men of the family were brought round to talk to her. Uncles, brothers brought to speak to her and urge her that this could never happen again.

A while later, she decided that it was too important to ignore and she got a Bible again. And it was found in her house, in her room again. And just a reasonable family in Lancashire in lots of other ways.

But as soon as they realized, they sent her to her room and called the guys round from her family again downstairs. And they were meeting to decide what to do about her having a Bible.

[20 : 38] And she phoned her friend to see if she could go and stay at her friend's house. And she knew as soon as she hung up the phone, there would be a beep downstairs on the phone.

So she knew she had one chance. And her friend said, just grab the keys to your car and leave. So she left the house knowing she'd never be able to go back to her family. She left the house.

Her brother ran out and jumped on the bonnet of the car to stop her. She drove away. She wasn't a Christian. Years later, she became a Christian. She's married now.

She's got children. She's got a family of her own. But she knew as she left that house, she'd never publicly be able to see her family again. The division that Jesus causes in our country today.

Why would we then be surprised to encounter that kind of division ourselves? Jesus says, you must expect that.

[21 : 38] Don't be surprised if it comes to you. Even at Christmas, I guess we'll invite people to the carol service here. And we know, don't we, that friends will come because they want to sing some carols because it's festive.

We hope they'll enjoy it. Some of them will be offended by what we believe. Perhaps not that evening, but perhaps as we talk more with them in the new year, perhaps if they come to Life Explore, we long that some of them will love it.

Some will be offended. It will cause division. If it does, we shouldn't be surprised. And we shouldn't even be dismayed.

I think we live in a society where division is often seen as the worst possible thing that could happen. Do anything to avoid division. But if we find that we're sharing our faith with people and we're finding that they are responding by dividing from us, it might be that we're doing it right.

Obviously, we want to be careful and ask ourselves, am I being sort of difficult or offensive? Am I being sensitive and loving and gracious? But at the same time, we shouldn't be cowards about what we believe about Jesus.

[22 : 54] If we understand, this is a time of impending fire. So the natural thing to do as a follower of Jesus Christ is to tell people about Jesus Christ, to hold on to him and our faith in him, even when there is relational damage from that.

And even when that damage is in our own family. And I guess it's worth saying if you're here tonight and you're still thinking about whether to become a Christian, but you're worried about how that would be taken by a parent or a partner or a friend, please don't let that put you off.

It is costly for many people, but these are the times when it's worth it. And Jesus explains that with his next picture. It's a time of division, but it's also a time, Jesus says, to settle up.

He likens our relationship with God to a legal drama in verse 57. Have a look. Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right? As you're going with your adversary to the magistrate, try hard to be reconciled on the way or your adversary may drag you off to the judge and the judge turn you over to the officer and the officer throw you into prison.

I tell you, you will not get out until you've paid the last penny. Now, I used to be a lawyer and lawyers are very expensive. Litigation is very expensive.

[24 : 19] I worked on a dispute as a lawyer. We went to trial. After 18 months of the trial, the other side discontinued because they knew they were losing.

So they had to pay our fees and they had to pay £85 million in legal fees. When somebody comes to you and you're a dispute lawyer, litigation lawyer, you're always trying to sort it out before you get to court because it's so expensive.

It's so damaging to losing court. Jesus appeals to us to use that same kind of wisdom when it comes to God and where we stand with him. He's saying there is this day of judgment coming where we're all going to stand before him as our judge.

It's actually a day that we should all be yearning for because there will be justice. But we must make sure before that day that we've settled our accounts with God. That God has nothing against us when we stand before him.

And his standards aren't the same as ours. We looked at this last week. Why isn't being good good enough for God? His standards are perfection in how we've treated him and other people.

[25 : 36] And the body of evidence he uses isn't what we'd like it to be. It's not just what perhaps our friends see of us. It's everything that we've ever thought and said and done.

Do you see how that shifts the balance? It might be very costly to be a Christian or to become a Christian. It might cause division that cuts across relationships that are precious.

But it is actually better to sacrifice peace with others now if it means you could have peace with the living God on judgment day.

Jesus is the prince of peace. His peace is coming to the world. Not just an end to war but a relational harmony like we've never seen before. He offers us peace with God.

Reconciliation, a clean verdict, everything put right, nothing to fear when we meet with God. Knowing him face to face forever. We'll have peace with each other after that judgment of impending fire cleanses the world.

[26 : 41] It is worth trusting him and holding on to him even when that's costly. And how will Jesus bring that peace for those who trust him?

Well that's our fourth point to understand about the times. That Jesus describes it as a time of impending fire but also a time of agonizing flood. Why hasn't he come in judgment yet?

He wants to. Have a look back at verse 50. He said, I've come to bring fire on the earth and how I wish it were already kindled but I have a baptism to undergo.

And what constraint I'm under until it is completed. That word for constraint there is a word of deep emotional distress.

If you don't think that Jesus knew what it's like to be stressed, here he tells us how deeply stressed he was because he longs to put the world right. Why doesn't he do it?

[27 : 39] Because he has a baptism to undergo. He's already been baptized in Luke's gospel. The baptism he's referring to here is a flood.

Baptism is with water. There is a flood coming to Jesus. He is going to be engulfed by the flood of the judgment of God so that at the cross he can take all of it on himself instead of it falling on his own people.

So what he's saying is this. I can't come to bring the refining, cleansing fire on the fire of judgment on the world yet because first that fire has to fall into my heart.

He tells us here how important justice is to him. I wonder, have you ever thought how precious you must be to God? that longing to judge the world and put it right.

He has held off from that so that he could die in your place so that he could take the judgment instead of you. In fact, that's why the cross is so central to Jesus' mission.

[28 : 54] It's interesting to think how is the cross described? In Romans chapter 3, I've just put the words on the screen. The injustice in the world calls into question the justice of God.

People say, well how can God be just and call people to himself given what they've done and the ways that they've lived and have this injustice going on in the world. And that same word for justice in the Greek the New Testament's written in is the word for righteousness.

And this is how the cross is explained in Romans 3. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, his justice.

Because in his forbearance he left the sins committed beforehand unpunished. He did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

So we look at the cross and we often think God is demonstrating there his love and he is. But he's also doing it to demonstrate that he is just and that the sword of his judgment has to fall.

[30 : 04] So in order for him to be able to justify people to make them right with him when they turn to him he stands in our place on the cross demonstrating that he's still righteous even though he is forgiving people.

In Gethsemane the prospect of facing that agony brought Jesus to beg that the cup would be taken from him. He knew that if he took it and endured the cross it would utterly destroy him.

But that if he said no we would all perish. And so he chose this baptism of fire that the fire would fall into his heart and we could be saved.

So choosing to follow Jesus isn't easy. He's challenged us in this evening series to transform our lives for him. To live a life where we're rich towards God and not towards ourselves.

A life where we listen obediently to him. A life that we live for the future and not for pleasure now. All of that is costly. For many of us following Jesus will cause division.

[31 : 09] Witnessing to him will cause division. But he says understand the times. 2016 Glasgow impending fire.

But look back at the baptism that he has undergone for us and see that the fire fell into his heart so that we could settle up with God ourselves and look forward to meeting him without fear.

Amen.