



## DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

MATTHEW 16:13–20

FEBRUARY 2016

# Interpreting the Times

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*One of the most quoted texts in the New Testament is about Jesus polling his twelve disciples about his identity. He wants to know what they are hearing out in the society, and finally what they think (Matthew 16:13–20).*

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It is during this exchange that Peter speaks up and declares that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus immediately explains that Peter's conclusion is based on divine revelation rather than human observation. He goes on to speak of the inevitable success of the church he is building on the rock that Peter represents.

Polling is a good way to discover what people are thinking, but not a good way to determine the truth. Sadly, leaders today often make their decisions based on polling the populace rather than hearing what the Father says about reality. Observation is good, but revelation is essential if we are to live in the truth. We are notoriously bad at interpreting what is happening, since we have limited perspective, com-

plicated by troubling emotional baggage.

Much like the famous storybook character, Chicken Little, we interpret phenomena incorrectly. Just to jog your memory, Chicken Little had an acorn fall on her head, and she surmised that the sky was falling. She confidently informed the whole barnyard of this event and its interpretation. If someone had polled the barnyard, the conclusion would have been: The sky is falling. People burdened with guilt, shame, and fear, interpret events through distorted optics. The desperation resulting from such a view creates behavior that depicts victimization rather than victory. Victims can be passionate, but are largely reacting to situations rather than responding with the confidence of victors.

We all have a default framework. It

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comes with being social creatures. Those who rear us and give us our first definitions impart our view of life to us. We tend to think that all people see life the way we do.

In the 1980s, I led several groups to visit the Bible lands. On our first trip, there were some who had been reading current prophecy books declaring that Armageddon was right around the corner and that large numbers of vultures were reported in Israel getting ready for the carnage. On our first night in Jerusalem, we had a lecture from a local biblical authority. Eagerly, the curious prophecy students wanted to know where to find the circling vultures. The man's face was

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aghast. "We have no idea what you are talking about," he said. I chuckled because I thought of how we all tend to think that everyone operates from our perspective.

The people who had been talking to the disciples had an Old Testament framework. When they sought to identify Jesus, they did so in light of their under-

standing. Surely he was one of the prophets. One time when the Father spoke to Jesus, the people around him thought it had thundered. The hard-hearted religious leaders explained Jesus in terms of having a demon. Later, on the day of Pentecost, some interpreted the strange phenomena as the result of drunkenness.

Today, we often approach Scripture with interpretive systems already in place. These determine which texts we emphasize and too often bend others to fit the system. In the current culture, the scientific perspective is dominant. Observation has been elevated to a point of ultimate authority. If it can't be observed, it can't be considered valid in this system.

But there is more to reality than human observation. "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." Divine revelation shows the true meaning of what has happened, what is happening, and what will happen. The Bible is the story of what the events of history mean. It is more than a recounting of a series of events. It is the story of what purpose those events serve in the narrative that God is telling.

One of the pivotal events in history was the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and its interpretation. Babylon captured Israel in the 6th century B.C., and Daniel was one of the choice young men

deported. The king had a disturbing dream and asked his wise men to tell the dream and the interpretation. They couldn't. The king was going to kill them all until

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he called Daniel whose God could tell what happened and what it meant. Daniel revealed to the king his exact dream and what it meant for him and for the future. This outline of history became the basis of hope for Israel from that time on.

Sure enough, Babylon was conquered by Persia, who was conquered by Greece, who was conquered by Rome. It was during this time that the stone rolled down the huge mountain and established a kingdom that would forever rule over all kingdoms. Jesus is that stone, and his kingdom is now on the march. In fact, the issue of the kingdom of God is the main feature of New Testament revelation. It was the subject of Jesus' preaching. He demonstrated its nature and power. It became the topic of Paul, Peter, Stephen, and Phillip in the book of Acts.

The disciples and the Jews had a framework for "kingdom." They knew about

Egypt, David's Israel, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. But they needed revelation about the nature and purpose of the new kingdom inaugurated by Jesus, the ultimate king. He told them it was not about fighting with swords. It didn't come with observation. It was like leaven in a lump of dough. It was like a small mustard seed that grew to be the largest of the trees in the garden. It was like a treasure in a field that was worth selling everything to obtain. It was like a pearl of such great value that nothing compared to it. It was like a wheat field that had some weeds in it. It was like a seed that inevitably germinates even though it is mysterious. It is like a dragnet that brings in fish of every kind. It is like seed falling on different kinds of soil. Not everyone got it at first. In fact, those whose heart was hard missed it altogether. God's revelation is only given to the heart willing to see his perspective.

The question remains for us: What has happened, and what does it mean?

### **What has happened?**

1. Jesus is revealed as the Son of man described in Daniel's dream. He has been given the eternal kingdom by the eternal God. Man's representative is now sitting on the throne of God's

- kingdom. He guarantees the success of God's plan on earth.
2. Jesus is the Lamb of Exodus. His blood on the cross has paid the penalty of our sin. His life gives us commonality with all his people and energizes us to live freely in his world.
  3. Jesus is the Priest in the eternal temple. He ever lives to make intercession for his own.
  4. Jesus is the Judge that vindicates his people and vanquishes his enemy.
  5. Jesus is the "Servant of Isaiah." He represents Israel, and suffers to bring in the new creation.
  6. Jesus is the Son of David. He is the heir that now sits on the throne. He is the one who conquered death through his resurrection.
  7. Jesus is Lord. He is the one to whom all will give account.

the gospel as the fulfillment of all prior words. While we work, Jesus is providentially moving in earthly nations to bring about the accomplishment of his mission. The ultimate issue is not political, but spiritual. All things are moving to exalt Jesus as the sufficient Son of God. He will not allow his name to be soiled. He will do what he promised . . . without fail. In the process he is exposing the hard-hearted by allowing them to embrace false religion while he is clarifying the central message that transforms all things. He is featuring the gospel that changes everything. As this message is embraced, the structures of his church will accommodate. Things are changing, but one thing is certain. God has made him Lord. That is reality regardless of what may seem apparent.

### **What does it mean?**

We live in a time in the story when Jesus is ruling through his people by the Spirit who is empowering them with the wisdom and love that characterizes his own life. His scepter is the mighty sword of the Spirit, the word of God. We are privileged to wield that sword by proclaiming



P.O. Box 2022  
Colleyville, TX 76034  
(817) 267-9224  
Fax: (817) 354-5522  
Email: [Mail@KerygmaVentures.com](mailto:Mail@KerygmaVentures.com)  
[www.KerygmaVentures.com](http://www.KerygmaVentures.com)