

“UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES”
1 Chronicles 12:32; Acts 17:22-34

In 1 Chronicles chapter 12, we find a long list of warriors who came to King David to pledge their allegiance to him. Among them, 1 Chronicles 12:32 lists the *“men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do – 200 chiefs, with all their relatives under their command...”*

Now notice two facts about the men of Issachar. First, they *“understood the times.”* They were perceptive about what was going on in the world around them. King Saul was no longer qualified to rule, and God had anointed David to be Saul’s successor. The men of Issachar understood the times. They sensed there was going to be a changing of the guard. Secondly, they *“knew what Israel should do.”* They joined forces with David and they prepared for battle.

Now that’s the goal of this message today. I want us in today’s sermon to understand the times in which we live from a spiritual perspective.

Spiritually, we are living in a pivotal time of history. Futurist Alvin Toffler has called this a “hinge period of history.” Peter Drucker, in *The New Reality*, writes: “This is a watershed of history that comes along once every 200 or 300 years.” Alan Bloom, in *The Closing of the American Mind*, says, “America has lost its soul and sense of direction.” You see, even the secular world acknowledges this is a crucial period of history.

So this is no time for Christian people to bury their heads in the sand and imagine that all things continue as they were from the beginning. We must understand that we are living in a time of intense spiritual warfare. Paul writes in Ephesians 6:11: *“Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against ... the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”* (vv. 11-12).

Now the battle we are going to talk about today could be traced all the way back to the Garden of Eden. It’s a battle between the forces of God and the “prince of darkness.” But it’s a battle that is heating up in our day and in our nation. I believe that right now America is involved in a civil war over values, and that it’s a battle for the hearts and minds of our children.

You see, there are two opposing spiritual ideas vying for the American mind today—Biblical Christianity, on one hand, and Secular Humanism on the other. *Secular*, in that it focuses on the moment, and *humanism*, in that it exalts man above everything else. There are those who want to build on the Judeo-Christian heritage, that was the foundation of this great nation, and there are those who want to abandon those principles in favor of the shifting sands of pluralism and liberalism. And it is imperative that as Christians we understand the

importance of this battle in every arena so that in the words of Paul, *“Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes”* (2 Corinthians 2:11).

For the past eight weeks we looked at the book of Proverbs. We talked about some very practical matters – how we can apply God’s wisdom to our everyday living as Christians. But this message today is much more philosophical, and you need to wipe the cobwebs from your mind and sit up and pay attention. If you’ve got an oxygen tank, get it out. We are going to go down a little deeper and stay a little longer than normal. Because we are going to be talking today about ideas. But ideas form behavior. If it were not for the ideas of Nietzsche, there wouldn’t have been Hitler’s ruthless march across Europe. If it were not for the ideas of Marx, we wouldn’t have the impact of Lenin and Stalin. If it were not for the ideas of the Gospel, we wouldn’t have the freedom that we enjoy in the Western civilization. In fact, in 2 Corinthians 10:4 the Bible says, *“[Now] the weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ”* (vv. 4-5).

So my goal in this sermon this morning is simply to sharpen your spirit of discernment so that the idea of the gospel is firmly planted in your mind. And I think we can best understand the times if we see the battlefield on four areas.

I. THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE BELIEF IN THE *SUPERNATURAL* AND *NATURALISM*.

The first is the conflict between a belief in the *supernatural* and *naturalism*.

You see, the Christian worldview is based on a belief in the *miraculous*.

We believe there is a God who is Creator and that He *alone* is to be worshiped.

The very first of the ten commandments reads: *“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt ... You shall have no other gods before me”* (Exodus 20:2-3). God identified Himself to the Israelites by performing the miraculous – parting the Red Sea, delivering them from Egypt. And He was a supernatural, but a jealous God. He said, *“You shall worship the Lord your God only”* (Luke 4:8). It wasn’t God *plus* Baal, God *and* Molech, but God *only* as Creator.

We believe that God has revealed Himself in the person of Jesus Christ and that He alone is *Savior*.

Jesus of Nazareth was God in the flesh who lived the perfect life, performed miraculous deeds, died an atoning death, and conquered the grave to demonstrate His deity and to provide us hope. And He said, *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the*

Father except through me” (John 14:6). Peter said, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

By the way, the early Christians were persecuted by the Romans, not because they believed Jesus was God—the Romans believed in many gods, so one more wouldn’t matter. The early Christians were persecuted by the Romans because they believed Jesus was the only God and that all others should be forsaken. And that was just too exclusive for the Romans.

We believe that Christ has been revealed accurately through Scripture and that it alone is the inspired Word of God. Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16: *“All Scripture is God-breathed.”* God guided those historians as they wrote so that the Bible is an accurate revelation of God’s will for man. And Jesus said, *“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away”* (Matthew 24:35).

The humanists, however, *reject* the supernatural altogether.

Humanism begins with a premise that there is no *God*, or if there is He can’t be *known* and He’s irrelevant.

Paul Kurtz, past editor of *The Humanist* magazine, writes: “Humanism cannot, in any fair sense of the word, apply to one who still believes in God as the source and the creator of the universe.”

So the Humanist teaches that we are not here by divine creation, but they teach we are here by a series of cosmic *accidents*—evolution over billions of years.

And those of you who are Christians in the field of education need to be aware that John Dewey, and Horace Mann, and many of the influential leaders in education in the past, were avowed humanists. And their fingerprints can be seen on many of the textbooks still in our schools today.

But the humanist believes we are evolving into *higher* beings and that we will eventually be able to resolve all our problems on our own.

Jesus Christ is not regarded as the divine Son of God, He’s “a good man,” “an admirable teacher.” But the idea that He is virgin-born, and performed miracles, and arose from the dead is thought to be ridiculous. One historian recently listed the 100 most influential leaders in history and Jesus was listed as third, behind Mohammad and Isaac Newton. “An influential leader? Sure. But just one of many,” they say.

And naturalism certainly rejects the idea that the Bible is the *inspired* Word of God.

If you reject the premise that God created the world, it's only natural you reject the idea of an inspired Bible. Now they are hard pressed to point out where the Bible is inaccurate, so they usually just kind of ridicule it. "Well, if you want to believe in a talking snake and a floating zoo, that's okay by me."

Not too long ago I spoke with a parent who picked up one of the books that his child had checked out from a public library. It was a book on fairytales, and in the middle of the book was a story of Noah and the Ark. Now there was a two-hour documentary on a major network recently in which scientists were saying, "Hey, there is good credible evidence that there was a worldwide flood. And we think we've discovered the Ark." But that information is disregarded. Subtly, deceitfully, ideas are implanted in the minds of young people today that the Bible isn't true, that it's a fairytale.

Now it's not just atheists who reject the basic premises of Christianity, *liberal* theologians are doing the same.

Professors in liberal seminaries today undermine a belief in the Scripture rather than building up the faith of the potential preachers. Some theologians are voting these days on which of the sayings of Jesus they can accept as accurate in Scripture and which they discard. And they discard over 80% of them! Denominational leaders are eliminating hymns like "Onward Christian Soldiers," saying they are too militaristic, even though the Bible says, "*Put on the full armor of God*" (Ephesians 6:11). Or they are changing the prayer in Scripture "*Our Father in heaven*" (Matt. 5:9), because it's too sexist and not politically correct.

Paul said to the Ephesian elders in Acts chapter 20, "*Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!*" (vv. 30-31). Because they are like savage wolves coming in among the sheep.

Understand there is this battle, spiritually, between those who believe in the supernatural and those who reject it.

II. THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE SPIRIT OF PATRIOTISM AND MULTICULTURALISM.

The second battle line is between the spirit of *patriotism* and *multiculturalism*.

Now the Christian worldview is that God had a *purpose* in the establishing of nations.

This is a little more difficult, so stay with me. Remember, following Noah's flood God said to the people, "You scatter throughout the world and multiply." But the people were afraid to do that, and they rebelled against God and they built this huge tower as a unifying force. And they said, "We will protect each other." They built the Tower of Babel. And God confounded their language and scattered them across the world.

Now I want you to look at Acts chapter 17. The apostle Paul was asked to speak to the intellectuals in the city of Athens. The Epicurean and the Stoic philosophers were there. The Epicureans were kind of the hedonists of that day; the Stoics were kind of the humanists of that day. And they asked him to talk about Christianity, this strange new religion he was talking about.

Look at how Paul began in verse 23: *“As I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.”*

So he begins with this idea that there is a supernatural Creator.

And then in verse 26 he says, *“From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us”* (vv.26-27).

You see, God determined where the nations would be – He determined which country would rise and fall – because there were fundamental lessons to be learned and there was protection to be had within the boundaries of the nations.

“Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people,” the Bible says (Proverbs 14:34).

“Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord” (Psalm 33:12).

In fact, in 1 Corinthians 10, Paul traces this history of the Jewish nation, and he says, *“These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come”* (v.11).

God instructs us and God protects us through the history of nations.

But the humanist’s worldview, now, is multiculturalism. **It’s kind of the breaking down of national barriers and the exalting of just a variety of cultures.**

“Every culture has value,” the humanist would say. No one nation is evil or good. No one culture is better than another, regardless of how barbaric, or how civilized, or how much of a believing nation, or how much of a pagan nation.

The hope for the future, according to the humanist, is a one-world government where man will be able to redeem himself.

Now certainly it is a shrinking world we live in today. We need to have international trade and international communication. But Christians need to be aware that the Scriptures predict that in the last days there will be a one-world government, an attempt apart from God to solve man's problems, but it will serve as the platform for the coming antichrist who will reek havoc. And we are hearing more and more today about a "new world order," and about a "global village," and "international community." And to achieve that, it will require the breakdown of national barriers and national pride.

I don't think it is any accident that so many of our national heroes are *ridiculed* these days.

"Ah, Columbus wasn't really a brave explorer. He was just a selfish villain who came here for materialistic purposes and brought syphilis to the Western world."

And cultural *differences* are underscored.

Instead of talking about just Americans, we hear more and more about Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, African Americans, Oriental Americans, European Americans, etc. And doesn't it seem strange that we hear about the need for unity, unity, unity, and yet we come back, and we keep emphasizing our differences?

And Western civilization is constantly *bashed* these days because it represents Christianity, and because there has been a strong patriotic feeling in America.

I streamed the movie *Dances With Wolves* one afternoon recently. The movie stars Kevin Costner and I've seen it I don't know how many times since its release a number of years ago. And I always enjoy the movie when I watch it. But Kevin Costner plays the part of a Civil War hero who was put on the Western frontier to guard a fort. He makes friends with the Sioux Indians. And you watch the movie and if you're not careful you walk away from it saying, "Boy, I'm ashamed of being a white person," because the Americans on the frontier were portrayed as vicious and perverted, while the Sioux Indians were portrayed as noble and very humane. Now there is no doubt that many white people abused the Native Americans. But historically, the Sioux Indians of that time were some of the most warlike and barbaric of people. But history is altered, and the impression is left that the Indians' most vicious enemy was Judeo-Christian civilization.

Or if you refer to the Founding Fathers in some circles today, they will say, "Well, you know, you're quoting those guys, but you know they had slaves." And that's true, and slavery was evil. But all other societies in the history of the world had slaves at one time, too. But it was the Western civilization, based on Christian principles, that first overcame slavery.

Winston Churchill said, “Democracy is the worst form of government—except for all the rest!”

Now the result of all this multicultural emphasis is twofold.

First, there is little or no sense of *patriotism*.

Patrick Henry saying “give me liberty or give me death” is really foreign to the ears of young people today. There’s not much pride in America.

And the second result is that there is little sense of *history*.

The lessons of God’s dealing with men in nations are not learned and we are uncertain about what to believe about the past.

Charles Colson wrote in his book *The Body*: “Take away a society’s common history and you take away that which binds it together.” And you take away your restraints that the wisdom of the past imposes on today’s behavior. And you also eliminate the Christian faith, which is based on historical fact.

The prophet Hosea said, “*My people are destroyed from a lack of knowledge*” (4:6).

III. THE CONFLICT BETWEEN A RESPECT FOR ABSOLUTES VERSES RELATIVISM.

Now the third battle line is a little more distinct, and that’s the conflict between a respect for *absolutes* verses *relativism*.

The Christian worldview is that God has established *fixed guidelines* for behavior for our benefit.

You know, the Ten Commandments: “*Honor your father and your mother,*” “*Don’t take God’s name in vain,*” “*Don’t lie,*” “*Don’t steal,*” “*Don’t commit adultery*” (Exodus 20:1-17). And God demonstrated appropriate behavior in the perfect person of Jesus Christ.

Look back at Acts chapter 17. Paul said to the Athenians in verse 30, “*In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead*” (vv. 30-31).

God is going to judge our behavior as it lines up to Jesus Christ. Jesus is the personification of truth. And if we want to know what’s right and what’s wrong, we look to Jesus Christ.

“Is it okay to eat meat?” Well, yes. Jesus did.

“Should we pay taxes to a government when we don’t always agree with it?” Yes. Jesus did.

“Should we divorce our mate when we don’t get along?” Well, Jesus said not to divorce your mate except for unfaithfulness. And He said, “My word doesn’t change.”

When John Quincy Adams was President of the United States, he called together both houses of congress and he stood on the rostrum holding two bushel size baskets. And he said, “Gentlemen, this bushel is from South Carolina and this one is from New York. The problem is, this one has 68 cubic inches more than the other.” He put them down and picked up two one-pound weights that are used in weighing produce. And he said, “This weight is from Massachusetts and this one is from Maine. The problem is, this one is an ounce heavier than the others.” Then putting them down, dramatically he said, “Gentlemen, we need a standard measure and a standard weight for the United States of America.” And that led to the establishment of the House of Wonders, the Bureau of Weights and Measures in Washington D.C., where there is a scale so delicate that you have to stand back 10 feet or body heat affects its weighing.

I understand that President Grover Cleveland was a big fisherman. And his second child was born in the house and the doctor said to Cleveland, “Would you get me a scale, please? Let’s see how much she weighs.” And he couldn’t find anything except his fisherman’s scales and his daughter weighed 25 pounds according to that scale!

Now, we all readily see the importance of a standard for weighing physical things, but it’s even more important that we reestablish a standard for the *moral* and *spiritual* realm.

That’s what God had in mind when He sent Jesus into the world. He said, “This is my Son. Hear him! This is what I had in mind when I made you.”

Now the humanist is seeking to abolish any absolute standards. “Since there is no God there is no absolute truth. Everybody ought to be free to do their own thing, as long as you don’t hurt somebody else,” they say.

So truth is determined by a *majority* opinion, or by your personal *feelings*, or by the latest *scientific* evidence.

Cable TV mogul Ted Turner argues that we should replace the Ten Commandments with “ten voluntary initiatives,” including respecting the planet, supporting the U.N., and agreeing only to have two children so you don’t overtax the environment. Now the difference between

Ted Turner's standard of ethics and Jesus Christ, among other things, is that Ted Turner has not been raised from the dead, as yet, to verify that it has God's endorsement.

You know, for a number of years now the prevailing motto of our culture has been "if it feels good, do it." **But if we come to a place in society where, just because you *feel* like doing something that gives you license to do it, it's going to be *chaotic*.**

I occasionally hear Christian people say, "Well, I don't want to get all that fanatical and feel like I'm in a battle. I just want to go to church to feel good." But there were people in America prior to World War II that wanted to be neutral about Hitler ruthlessly marching across Europe. But then Pearl Harbor was bombed, and we were in it whether we wanted to be or not.

And folks, the adversary is encroaching on Christian territory, and it's time to get in the *battle*, spiritually speaking, and to take a *stand*!

When Judge Amy Coney Barrett was nominated for the Supreme Court last fall, some of the objection against her was that she believes in "natural law," of all things! Now what does that mean? Well, it means that she believes in God and that there's an innate law of absolutes. And they didn't want another person like that on the Supreme Court.

You see, the philosophy of relativism has infiltrated all of society and the consequences have been disastrous—venereal disease, and AIDS, and broken homes, and spouse abuse, and skyrocketing crime, and instant easy access to pornography, and drugs.

Proverbs 14:12 says, *"There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death."*

So even those who aren't committed Christians are beginning to see that something is tragically wrong and that something needs to be done.

Journalist and TV news personality Ted Koppel spoke to 2300 graduates at Duke University, and he talked to them about the need for reestablishing moral absolutes. He said, "What Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai were not the ten suggestions, they are ten commandments." And he urged the Duke students to reject the worship of false gods of materialism and shallow fame and to pursue goals that are rooted in moral absolutes.

The cure to what ails our society is so simple if we would just surrender to Jesus Christ.

Paul said, *"[God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead"* (Acts 17:31).

I heard about a guy who went to the doctor and said, “Doc, when I push right here on my wrist it hurts like mad.” And he said, “When I push here on my ribs, it’s excruciating. And when I push right here on my neck, it really hurts.”

The doctor said, “Well, we’re going to have to take some x-rays.”

The x-rays came back, and the man said, “Doc, have you found the problem?”

And the doctor said, “Yes I have. You have a broken finger!”

Now it seems like we have got a multiplicity of problems. Boy, it hurts over here in education. And we’re in trouble in business and government. And we’re in trouble over here in our seminaries. But the real problem is, we’ve simply got a broken spirit. And the prescription is simple, and that is to come to the One who can heal us—the Prince of ethics, Jesus Christ. And once we surrender to Him, everything else will fall into place. Because he said, *“Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well”* (Matthew 6:33).

IV. THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE *ETERNAL* VERSES THE *SECULAR*.

But there is one other battle line I want you to see, and that is a focus on the *eternal* verses the *secular*.

The Christian believes there is *life* beyond the grave.

In fact, this life has meaning, and life can be interpreted only in light of the eternal consequences. If you are riding in a hot air balloon and you know that in ten minutes you are going to crash and die, I doubt very much that you are going to enjoy the scenery. And if this life is all we have, it’s not very meaningful or enjoyable.

But in 2 Corinthians chapter 4, Paul said, *“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal”* (vv. 16-18).

Paul said to the Athenians, *“[God] has given proof of this to all men by raising [Jesus] from the dead. [And] when they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered”* (Acts 17:31-32).

Now the humanist still *sneers* at the idea of life after death.

“That’s supernatural, that’s just wishful thinking. Put your focus in this life.” “You only go around once, so reach for all the gusto you can.” ‘Seize the day.’ “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die!” “If it feels good, do it!”

But Paul said, *“If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ...For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive”* (1 Corinthians 15:19-22).

And therein is meaning to life and hope for the future.

Bob Benson knew he was dying of cancer when he wrote his last book, and he said he always thought of dying as “leaving the party early.” But then he realized that there is a party going on in heaven and that he was missing out on it. And what I like most about the book is its title. The title is *See You at the House*. And if you have a good family, you say “See you back at the house,” and that communicates warmth, and fellowship, and laughter, and food, and security.

And Jesus said, *“In my Father’s house are many rooms ... [and] I am going there to prepare a place for you”* (John 14:2-3).

That was so comforting to me when my mother died back in 1991, because my mother loved to entertain people. And our house was always open to people, and people stopped by all the time. And it is just reassuring to think of heaven as being a party.

And the great news is, that’s not just wishful thinking. That’s not something that brings false hopes when you are grieving. It’s true! It’s absolutely true because it is based on the historical fact of Jesus Christ raising from the dead. And He said, *“Because I live, you also will live”* (John 14:19).

We believe that God is our Creator—He alone is worthy of *worship*.

We believe that Jesus is our Savior—He alone can forgive our *sins* and conquer the *grave*.

We believe that God has established absolute guidelines for our benefit, and they are communicated accurately in the Bible—and it alone is the infallible *Word of God*.

And we believe that every day has meaning—because it is just the *prelude* to eternity.

That is worth believing in. That is worth fighting for. And as for me, I will die for that belief!

So understand the times. A time of intense spiritual warfare and a time to take appropriate action.