

Discernment - Part 3

by Vance Havner

Vance Havner emphasizes the necessity of discernment in understanding the times and preparing for Christ's return amidst global chaos.

Duration: 34:24

Scripture: 1 Chronicles 12:32, Zechariah 14:4, Matthew 16:3, Luke 3:2-3, Luke 12:56, Romans 13:11, 2 Peter 3:10

Topics: "Discernment"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of discerning the times we live in. He references Matthew 16:3, where Jesus asks if people can discern the signs of the times. He highlights the example of the children of Issachar in the Old Testament who had understanding of the times and knew what Israel ought to do. The preacher also mentions the need to know the seasons and awaken from spiritual sleep. He concludes by stating that we are living in a strange hour and that denying the signs of the times is, in fact, another sign.

Transcript

Yesterday we thought together about discerning the truth. Our discernment verse this morning is Matthew 16, 3, about discerning the times. Ye can discern the face of the sky, but can ye not discern the signs of the times? We read in the Old Testament that the children of Issachar had understanding of the times to know what Israel ought to do.

They didn't just have a knowledge of the times, they had a knowledge that produced an understanding of the times that led to a further knowledge of what to do. Some people know a lot about the times, but they don't know what to do. Then we read in the New Testament that we are to know the times, and that knowing the seasons, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep.

Everybody knows that old tale about the farmer whose clock went on a rampage and struck seventeen in the middle of the night. He ran around all over the place waking everybody up, saying, Get up, it's later than it ever has been before. Well, it is, and you don't have to have a clock to strike seventeen to tell you that.

There is no other possible explanation of these frightening times than the New Testament doctrine of the last days. The Brethren don't all agree on the details. I don't all agree on the millennium.

I have some fine friends in the faith who don't see a lot of this program like I do, or perhaps like the majority. But it's not a basis for Christian fellowship, your eschatological views, although I think it's pretty good key to what you might believe about the rest of it. I can still have fellowship on other grounds with some of them.

I am reminded of a man who separated from his wife and he built her a house right next to his. One day a friend came by and looked in and saw pies and cookies and cake on the table and said to him, I didn't know you were a cook. He said, I'm not.

He came from next door. He said, well, why in the world don't you and that woman live together? He said, nobody could live with that woman, but you couldn't ask for a better neighbor. So we may not be able to get along under the same roof in eschatology on some things, still we can be neighbors, and I reserve that right.

We've had famines and pestilences and earthquakes and wars and rumors of wars and men's hearts failing them for fear from the beginning, but never with such frequency and such intensity and never converging concurrently as they are now. And the picture, I think, is that of anarchy in the world and apostasy in the professing church and apathy in the true church. Jesus said, because lawlessness shall abound, the love of the majority that is in the original, the love of most, will wax cold.

And that's exactly where we are. And you'd have to be blind in both eyes and bereft of your brains not to see the hand of God assembling the pieces of the world puzzle before your very eyes. It's not popular with some churchmen who want to cooperate with this world order to superimpose a counterfeit kingdom of God on an unregenerate society.

We can indeed discern the face of the sky, and we're so smart we can ride through the sky to the moon, but here on earth we've run into an impasse in every direction. In a day of experts who think they have the answer when they don't even know what the question is. The prophet Jeremiah writes about those who cry, peace, peace, when there's no peace.

And the apostle Paul writes about those who say peace and safety or security, and he says when you hear that sudden destruction comes. The Christians are just the other way around from everybody else on earth. When they say peace and safety, when it's anything that's good news to them is bad news for Christians, because he says sudden destruction is coming.

But you turn it the other way around. When men's hearts fail them and all these signs appear, that's bad news. But the Bible says when you see that, lift up your head so your redemption grows.

Bad news is good news, and good news is bad news for a Christian. And we're living in a world that's torn by strife and violence, and we can say with Jeremiah, we look for peace but no good came, and for a time of hell, and behold, trouble. We don't like to see the battle flags furrow, but when men say peace and security, sudden destruction comes.

Vietnam will not be the last battlefield for the final conflict will be, we believe, in the Middle East. No doubt many of you have seen the last battlefield in the Valley of Israel, and when I saw it, I remembered what Douglas MacArthur said. If we do not now devise a more equitable system, Armageddon will be upon us.

And the great general summed it up when he said this, the problem is basically theological. That's quite a statement for an army man to make. And it involves a spiritual recrudescence.

It must be of the spirit if we're to save the flesh. Strangely enough, when Douglas MacArthur said that, he almost repeated what had been said years before by another great American who spent his best years seeking world peace and then died a physical wreck in dejection and defeat. Woodrow Wilson went to Europe at the end of World War I at the height of his career and was welcomed as a Messiah, and then just a little later on, broken in body and bruised in spirit, he gathered together what little strength he had left.

And he said this, the sum of the matter is this, that our civilization cannot survive materially if it is not redeemed spiritually. It can be saved only by being permeated by the spirit of Christ and being made free and happy by the practices that sprang out of that spirit. Only thus can discontent be driven out and all the shadows flee from the road ahead.

Now put that together. MacArthur, the problem is basically theological. Wilson, the sum of the matter is our civilization cannot survive materially if it is not redeemed spiritually.

And since Woodrow Wilson's day, he went over there for peace, and then FDR went to Yalta and Truman went to Potsdam and LBJ went to Glassboro and Nixon went to Peking and Moscow and Ford went to Vladivostok and Japan. But world peace doesn't come that way, by the way of diplomacy and summit conferences. As MacArthur said again, military alliances and balances of power and leagues of nations all in time fail, leaving the only path to be the way of the crucible of war.

And that's what we get back to every time. When Franklin D. Roosevelt started over there, some sage wrote in one of our papers, the president was writing on the line of Manhattan, and this cynic said, the Messiah is not on the Manhattan, which was well said. When Woodrow Wilson wrote the last thing he ever wrote, *The Road Away from Revolution*, he sounded so little like his confident self of earlier days.

And some people thought that it was pathetic, but it wasn't. It was prophetic. He never stood any taller than when all the Presbyterian in him came to the forefront.

He said, we can be saved only by being permeated by the Spirit of Christ. World peace is basically a theological problem. Any kind of peace is a theological problem, if you want to put it that way.

Peace for the individual comes only through personal faith in Jesus Christ. Peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ. And then peace in our hearts, peace of God, which passes understanding.

And peace for the world will come only by the return of our Lord. The world is not going to be Christianized, never will be Christianized. It ought to be evangelized.

Christians ought to support their government in trying to prevent all the wars we can prevent and have all the law and order we can have. But in the context and in the framework of God's plan and purpose in history, God's history within history, because that's what it is, tells us where we're going. The doctrine of world peace awaits the return of our Lord, very unpopular and very distasteful even to some churchmen today.

A.J. Gordon was a great Baptist preacher in Boston, and he took a stand in his day. It doesn't make you popular to come out and take a positive stand. I could name a leading Baptist educator of some years ago, well-known, who said an enigmatical book's enigmatical allusion to the period of a thousand years and the idea that Christ must return to accompany by force what he could not do by the gospel was ridiculous to him.

And he also said that Jews would never go back to Israel, said they want to live in the cities where they can make money. They're not going over that rock pile over there. But we've seen the desert blossom as the rose, and the gentleman's statement's been refuted.

But the Christian who understands his Bible is not deceived by cries of peace, and there's no peace, when they shall say this and that. You know better. The Bible taught Christian knows that the earth and the works in it are going to be burned up.

I personally believe that Jesus is coming back, and this present earth is going to be redeemed, going to be made over like it was to start with. Now, that's not the final heaven, but I take great joy in that. I'm a great lover of the outdoors.

One of my hobbies is bird watching. They say that's sissy, but Teddy Roosevelt was a bird watcher, and he wasn't a sissy. John Stott of England's one of their greatest preachers, and he's an inveterate bird watcher.

He got up the other day over there where they knew his habits and took his text, you know, Consider the Fowls of the Air. He said, Now that means watch birds. Well, I like to think that one of these days, and I believe that you must admit it, that you can't refute it anyway, that the time may come when this thing's going to be made over pretty, and I'm going to be one of the saints that's going to reign and rule here.

You know, sometimes when I get out walking down, I get out in some fine part of town and run into these keep out signs. Get off the grass. You don't belong here.

Keep out. And I say, That's all right. You can have it.

It's all coming back to me anyhow one of these days. Because the meat shall inherit the earth. Somebody said, That's the only way they'll get it.

Well, we're going to get it. And I tell them, I say, You may have the least, brother. I got the deed.

It's coming back to God's people. So I'll have a time over that. But after that, you know, the devil's going to get loose again, and then there's going to be the destruction, I think, of the earth and the works thereof.

And then we're going to have the final new heavens and new earth and new Jerusalem and all the rest of it. But this old world is going to wind up, you know, by fire. And I'm not depositing too heavily, and anything's going to end up as one great big cinder.

I'm not depositing in a bank that's going broke. Lay up treasure in heaven where moth and rust don't corrupt, thieves break through and steal. I'm not too excited about peace palaces and so many conferences and leagues and nations.

I stood in Geneva and looked down at that peace palace there, and they thought that there's where it could be done. And then I looked up to where one of Switzerland's most majestic and world-known mountains reared its shoulders way up among the clouds, and I thought, what a contrast. This man's poor efforts are up there, God's eternal mountain, and what he says will last.

And he says a lot here about what we're to look forward to. I spent one afternoon all by myself on top of the Mount of Olives. I wanted to get quiet.

And I looked out over old Jerusalem each morning. I'd been getting up early to look out over that old city. And that afternoon, that day, I stood alone and thought about him standing there.

If thou hadst known, he said, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong to this thy peace. And the very name means city of peace, and they've had less of it than any other city on the face of the earth. And then my Lord said, Your house is less than to you desolate.

And I don't know of any better word that'll describe old Jerusalem. I'm not talking about the new one with all its apartment houses and all the rest of it, but I don't know of anything that'll describe it better, but oh, how it's been invaded and leveled and captured and sacked and pillaged and destroyed and rebuilt. Three temples have risen and disappeared.

We had a great conference in Virginia a week before last. Bertha Smith got going there one morning for a solid hour without looking at a note and took us clear through the Old Testament and all the sacrifices and the offerings and about the three temples and how that the glory of God didn't come down on Zerubbabel's temple, didn't come down on Solomon's temple like it had on the original, didn't come down on the Herod's temple like it had on Solomon's temple. But the fire fell next time, she said, at Pentecost.

And that did me a lot of good, and I got to thinking about that, and I ought to do something to shout about it, I think. But it's been trampled, Shishak and Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar and Antiochus, Epiphanes and Pompey and Titus and the Persians and the Saracens and the Turks and Crusaders and Saladin and the Ottomans and Allenby all went through and left their footprint. That still is.

Glory in its past and glorious in its future. And on that last day on the Mount of Olives, I stood there and I said, Lord, you said you were coming back. I'd like to be on the reception committee.

I'm here. I wish you could come today. The book says you're going to split this hill in two, says that over there in Zechariah.

And it came the first time when the world was in a condition not unlike what it's in today. We've made the circuit and we've run the cycle, and here we are again. Civilizations reached an impasse.

Nobody knows the answer to one single problem today, not one, you name it, apart from the word of God. Night is far spent, the day is at hand. I get a thrill out of the humor, the concealed humor.

If you want to look at it that way, in Luke 2, I read that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. Now, he looks pretty important in that verse. And all went to be taxed, everyone went to his own city, but he wasn't moving in that except to provide the setting for verse 4. Here's where God was moving.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee to be taxed with Mary, his espoused wife. That's where God was moving. You wouldn't have given him a second look if you'd seen that little peasant couple on their way up to the great taxation.

But that's where God was moving. Then you turn over to chapter 3, and if you want to read a who's who, you've got it there. Now, in the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Etchurea and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene, Annas, and Caiaphas being high priests.

My, my! You talk about a list of notables, but what comes next? They were just windowed dressing. The word of God came unto John in the wilderness. That's where God was moving.

These big shots thought they had it made. They just provided background, and that's the way it always has been. We're living in a great time.

I heard a radio preacher the other day who certainly, if he had any eschatology, I couldn't detect what it was, but his text was, when these things begin to come to pass, lift up your heads, and a day of redemption goes by. But he was talking about brotherhood and socialism through education, legislation, sanitation, ventilation, and all the rest of it. And I said, Lord, have mercy on you.

In a day of beasts and seals and trumpets and four horsemen and the harlot and the beast and scorpions and dragons and sea of glass mingled with fire and earthquakes and falling stars and Babylon and the bottomless pit and the 666 and the downfall of Babylon and the great white city coming down, brother, it's no time to tiptoe through the tulips. That's not my picture of it at all. And I'm living, and you want to know what time it is, beloved? It's until.

Next time somebody asks you what time it is, say, well, it's until. Now, he might think you had wheels in your head, but it might give you a chance to say something. I'm amazed at the untills of my New Testament.

There's your watch. He which hath begun a good work will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ. I'm waiting until he which hindereth is taken out of the way.

I'm judging nothing before the time until the Lord come, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled, until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in. I'm holding fast what I have until he come. I want to be sincere and without offense till the day of Jesus Christ, till he send forth judgment unto victory, until he puts all things under his feet, until he subdues all things unto himself.

I want to show forth the Lord's death until he come, when I partake of the Lord's table. We're living in the great until. That great preacher I mentioned a while ago, A.J. Gordon, on his tombstone are just these words, until he come.

He knew what time it was. I was down here in Cordele, Georgia, somewhere in a conference, and I preached along this line, and a dear brother wrote to me, and since then I've been getting letters. I've used the devil's word, and I've been getting letters that instead of saying yours truly, they wind up until.

And I kind of like that. The last thing that my dear wife managed to scribble, and how she could write in the condition she was in, I do not know. But I had it, and I got it put away.

She'd heard this, and the last written message, I can make it out, barely legible. And it said, I'm going through things I can't tell you about, until. And that was it.

So I'm waiting for the great until. And we're going to find out a lot of things we don't know now, then. So you can afford, it won't be long.

I had lunch with R. G. Lee in his home the other day, and he's, in that new book of his, he's got the sweetest poem, and he doesn't credit it to anybody. I wonder if he wrote it. It winds up in just a little while.

Every verse ends in just a little while. Everything's going to clear up in just a little while. We're living in a strange hour.

I was in Jacksonville in meetings, and from my hotel, that was the time when the last batch of astronauts went up, and I watched them from the T.V. over in the corner. But I could go and look out the window into a park that I didn't dare walk in. It wasn't safe.

Smart enough to go to the moon, and not safe enough to walk in the park. That's where we are. That's the paradox of these times.

You say there are no signs. I spoke at Southwestern the other day to that great crowd of preacher boys, and I think most of them must believe, like I do about this thing, because I got a roar in response when I said, When you see a fellow who says there are no signs, you've just seen another sign. I don't know of any placard that advertises it better than this guy goes around and says there aren't any signs.

They say, Well, how could the voice of an archangel wake anybody up? Well, they don't say that now. You can blow a horn in New York and be heard in Australia. If we can deafen ears around the world with a horn and an archangel to be able to wake up the dead with a trumpet, it seems to me.

Well, some people say all you can do is just be ready. No, it isn't. I believe in being ready, but they were expectant of me.

That's another matter. When I was a pastor and went around calling, my members seemed to be more or less ready when I came, but some of them didn't seem to be hilariously anticipating my visit. And any of you who grew up with a sister knows very well that when some ordinary boyfriend was coming that evening, she got ready, but you could always tell when the one was coming.

The program of beautification began in the middle of the afternoon, and it looked like that old clock had stopped from pure meanness, so slowly passed out. She was looking for the one. One of my great friends was Donald Ray Barnhouse.

He helped me get started in conference work. A brilliant man who could preach in French as easily as in English, and knew his Bible. He used to tell about Scottish fishermen that would go off for several days on a fishing trip and then they'd come back and their wives would meet them down at the dock.

He said they came in one time and the old skipper was looking. He said, Well, Stephen, I see you're merry. George, I see Margaret.

Henry, I see Anne. Philip, I don't see Elizabeth. And they all got off, and Philip made his way up the little hill, and there was a light in the window.

And she met him at the door and said, Dear, I'm waiting. Yes, he said, but you weren't watching. She wasn't right down there at the dock, just all excited about him coming.

I think there's a difference. We have to wait. What else can you do? Don't brag about that, but are you watching, looking for him to come? And then your great Atlanta preacher, Lindsey, broke.

He used to hold forth in the old tabernacle. He went off one time and said, I think I'll be back tomorrow night. And the family all cleaned up that afternoon for him.

He got held up and didn't get back that night, and the next night, and the next night, and the next night. And they got ready every afternoon for him to come, and he never showed up. Finally he did come the very last of the week.

And he said, Well, I'm sorry to be so late, but he kept the family cleaned up for a whole week. And so one good thing is he that hath this hope in him purifieth himself. And that's why I'm glad we don't know just when.

Maybe we'll be more or less ready when he does come. I hope so. One of my other great friends in the ministry was W. B. Riley of Minneapolis.

He baptized my wife. I was with him in his church for two weeks when I just started out. And with this great preacher sitting there looking at me.

But I learned one thing back then. A great preacher is the easiest person in the world to preach to. And if he just thinks he's a great preacher, he needs preaching to.

So W. B. Riley had a friend there who was a bishop, and they didn't see eschatology alike at all. And they argued by the day, and Riley was at his best in argument. He was a lawyer in the pulpit in a way.

And then they were separated for some time, and when the bishop came back, he said, Well, Riley, Jesus hasn't come yet. Riley said, No, Bishop, and for your sake, I'm glad he hasn't. Well, you may feel that way sometimes.

It's a good thing to be ready. And then there was that great preacher on the West Coast who preached one morning a great sermon. And some seminary students were there, and they came up after and said, Doctor, we just can't get that out of the New Testament the way you preached it this morning.

He said, Of course you can't get it out. It's in there to stay. And thank the Lord it is.

I have a preacher friend who says that every time Cronkite ends up by saying, That's the way it is, I say under my breath, No, Walter, that's not the way it is. That's just the way it looks. I feel that way.

I find myself on my stobes many times saying under my breath those immortal lines of James Russell Lowell. Careless seems the great avenger. History's pages but record one death grapple in the darkness, twixt old systems and the word.

Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne. That's the way it looks. But that's not the way it is, because the rest of it says, Yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own.

That's the way it is. It's a good thing to get straight in the difference between the way it looks and the way it is. Many years ago I was with a young Presbyterian preacher in Narberth, Pennsylvania, in meetings.

He has since gone to First Presbyterian of Tulsa and now Fifth Avenue Presbyterian in New York City, Brian Kirkland. Truth forever on the throne. That's the way it looks.

But that's not the way it is, because the rest of it says, Yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own. That's the way it is. It's a good thing to get straight in the difference between the way it looks and the way it is.

Many years ago I was with a young Presbyterian preacher in Narberth, Pennsylvania, in meetings. He has since gone to First Presbyterian of Tulsa and now Fifth Avenue Presbyterian in New York City, Brian Kirkland. He wrote a book with an intriguing title.

I'm charmed with the title, Home Before Dark. I wrote to him the other day about that. It set me thinking.

I don't know how you feel. I look at some of you this morning that are in my age bracket, I think. I won't dwell on that for your comfort.

But your original equipment's playing out. You're showing signs of wear and tear. Looking at me through those trifocals, got your teeth in your pocket, maybe.

Brother, I'm waiting for a new outfit. My Easter outfit's coming up one of these days. I heard the modernist preacher said he thought we'd worn out that word salvation, or he used the word salvage.

Now, wasn't that a bright idea? When you salvage something, you salvage the same old wreck. Salvation's a brand new job. I don't want to be towed into heaven behind a wrecking crew.

I want to go in brand new. But I find myself, and you'll excuse me for being personal about this, but I want to get home before dark in several ways. If it pleases the Lord, I'd like to go before my faculties play out.

Sometimes it doesn't work that way. Oh, I went to see one of my preacher brethren. He's gone to heaven now, but just a couple of months ago.

And I'm afraid that when I saw him and he looked at me, I'm afraid my face registered my amazement. Such a husky specimen he had been. And I looked at him.

Hadn't been able to preach. He hadn't for a long time. If they took him to church, he'd sit there and cry.

I can't imagine him sitting in church crying. And I found myself saying, Lord, if it's all right with you, I'd like to go before something like that hits me. I think about another dear friend of mine.

Oh, what a preacher. What a preacher. You've heard him.

But now, with hardening of the arteries, he forgets. He tells a story, and then he forgets where he is, and he can't get it together. I'd like to go before that kind of dark.

I'd like to go before another kind of dark. You're never safe. You get home, you're saved, but you're never safe from making some big blunder.

And if you make that big blunder, they'll all remember that big blunder and forget every blessed thing you did back up the road. They'll say, yes, yes, but I'd like to go before that. My friend Dr. Culbertson, President of the Moody Institute, had a poem he was very fond of.

I can't quote it all, but in it, he said, Don't let me, Lord, get to the place where I'm a workless worker in a working world. I'd like to go before that. Then I'd like to get home, and I think, oh, well, before it gets dark in this world, because the lights are going out, and they're going out fast.

But it's the darkness before the dawn for whoever's ready. My old daddy used to, when I started out as a boy, I was only 12, and for three, nearly four years, I went around preaching, and he went with me. Then when I was old enough to travel around in my teens, he'd meet me at Newton, North Carolina, at the little

railroad station.

I can see him yet, standing with that little old Ford Roadster with that old blue serge suit on, hadn't been pressed since the day he bought it. I'd go up to him, and the first thing he'd ask would be, How did you get along?

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