

# *The* GRACE JOURNAL

*"Taking God's Grace to the World"*

A BIBLE STUDY AND NEWS PERIODICAL

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## Our Lord's First Sermon

BY RICHARD JORDAN

Over time believers have developed various methods of studying the Bible. Some study it *systematically* by topic, others use an *inductive* or *deductive* method to arrive at conclusions. Still others divide the Bible into "*stages*" to make it more manageable, while many simply provide *outlines* by book, chapter or topic.

Although there is helpful merit in these various approaches, the Bible itself actually sets forth its own divinely designed methodology for its proper study:

"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (II Tim. 2:15).

In order to "*rightly divide the word of truth*," we must mark the proper divisions in Scripture. The Bible's great divisions are between its various "*dispensations*."

### DEFINING THE TERMS

A dispensation is often defined as a "period of time" in which God works with man in a particular way, but this is only partially true. In reality, calling a dispensation a "period of time" gets the cart before the horse. Actually, the Bible term "dispensation" refers to a *particular set of instructions* or a *particular arrangement of dealing with people* God has chosen to dispense during a particular period of time. While it clearly involves a "period of time," it is the *instructions* God has established to be in order during that time that distinguishes one dispensation from another.

Thus, at its most basic level, dispensational Bible study is identifying the particular instructions

God has administered for man's obedience and placing them at the proper place on the divine time-line. Take the context of II Timothy 2:15 as a guide:

Hymenaeus and Philetus had "*erred concerning the truth*," not because they had denied or questioned the reality or validity of the resurrection—rather, they had simply placed it at the wrong point on the divine time-line: "saying the resurrection is *past already*" (vs. 16-18).

In order to extract the "profit" from God's word that He has placed there for us (II Tim. 3:16, 17), we must approach the study of Scripture in this divinely prescribed manner .

A profoundly suggestive example of this principle is found in our Lord's first sermon recorded in Luke 4.

### HIS FIRST SERMON

As He entered into His public ministry, our Lord began immediately to show His beloved nation how to "*rightly divide the word of truth*" and thus to understand just where they stood in the program of God. Notice how this is demonstrated in His first recorded sermon:

"And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up for to read.

"And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias..."(vs.16,17).

Having found the passage we know as Isaiah 61:1,2, notice carefully just how much of the passage He actually read—and why:

“...and when he had OPENED THE BOOK, he found the place where it was written,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised,

“To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.

“And HE CLOSED THE BOOK, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him” (vs. 17-20).

If you will turn to Isaiah 61:1,2 you will quickly see why He had their undivided attention: He had stopped reading and “*closed the book*” right in the *middle* of the sentence! But *why*? The answer to this question emphasizes the importance of the right division of Scripture. Look carefully at the next verse in Luke’s account:

“And he began to say unto them, THIS DAY IS THIS SCRIPTURE FULFILLED IN YOUR EARS” (v. 21).

Indeed, the Spirit of the Lord was upon Him, anointing Christ “to preach the gospel to the poor.” He had sent Him “to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised” and “to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.” But—had He continued to the end of the sentence in Isaiah 61:2 He could not have declared, “*This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears,*” for the verse in Isaiah goes on to read:

“...AND THE DAY OF VENGEANCE OF OUR GOD.”

The “*acceptable year of the Lord*” had indeed come and the Lord was there among His people proclaiming the good news. He stopped reading and “*closed the book*” when He did, however, because “*the day of vengeance of our God*” had *not* yet come.

Thus our Lord began His ministry demonstrating Himself to be a dispensationalist, carefully rightly dividing the word.

Nor did He, by thus rightly dividing Isaiah 61:2, set aside as untrue the last part of the verse. Later He warns Israel of the consequence of rejecting Him and their opportunity to receive the long promised blessing of God on the nation—“*the acceptable year of the Lord*”—pointing out the dire results:

“For these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled.

“But woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck, in those days! for there shall be great distress in the land, and wrath upon this people” (Luke 21:22,23).

It was because this good news was to be rejected by Israel that Isaiah had gone on to predict “the day of vengeance of our God.” And reject they did, demanding His crucifixion. John 19:15 records:

“But they cried out, AWAY WITH HIM, AWAY WITH HIM, CRUCIFY HIM. Pilate saith unto them, Shall I crucify your King? The chief priests answered, WE HAVE NO KING BUT CAESAR.”

This, according to prophecy, was to be followed by the pouring out of God’s wrath (Psa. 2:1-5; 110:1). Hence, Peter—another dispensationalist—stood at Pentecost and, quoting Joel 2:28-32, warned that “*the day of vengeance of our God*” was ahead for them, and giving them a *renewed* opportunity of repentance.

Joel’s prophecy basically predicted two things: first, the pouring out of God’s Spirit upon His own and, then, the pouring out of His wrath upon His enemies. The former, as Peter said, took place at Pentecost, but not the latter. The Spirit was poured out but the wrath of God was—and is still—yet to come. The prophetic program has been *interrupted*. Again, we must rightly divide the word.

The reason for the interruption is not difficult to find. Rather than destroying, our Lord saved Saul of Tarsus, the leader of the rebellion against Him (I Tim. 1:13-16) and commissioned him to proclaim “*the gospel of the grace of God*” (Acts 20:24). Thus was ushered in “*the dispensation of the grace of God*” (Eph. 3:1-9), under which we live today.

The “acceptable year of the Lord” ended for the nation Israel with her rejection of her risen, glorified Lord. But rather than respond immediately in wrath and vengeance, God Himself has *temporarily interrupted the prophetic program*, holding back “the day of vengeance,” all because He had an unprophecied, secret purpose to unfold regarding the Body of Christ—a company of believers to be saved by grace, through faith alone, and given a heavenly position and prospect.

We should be ever so grateful that our Lord “*closed the book*” just where He did—and that He

has not yet opened it again to proclaim “the day of vengeance of our God.”<sup>1</sup>

Already the dispensation of grace has lasted almost 2000 years! Such is God’s longsuffering to a Christ-rejecting world. And what is the response to such gracious forbearance? Solomon well wrote:

“Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil” (Eccl. 8:11).

The brokenness of the world about us—the anger, violence, suffering, injustice, chaos and devastation that unfolds before our eyes is testimony that sin still produces its fruit, even when God’s wrath is in abeyance.

That wrath has been delayed—but this in no wise means it is not real! Little wonder Paul so pointedly says,

“Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?

“But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God” (Rom. 2:4,5).

Paul understood that the delay in the outpouring of God’s wrath would not last forever—he, too, was a dispensationalist! Every additional day is a day of grace—of unmerited favor from God. No unsaved person should put off trusting Christ this very moment!

And surely this is why Ephesians 5:15-17 exhorts believers:

“See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise.

“Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.

“Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.”

Christ, Peter and Paul each clearly understood the principle of “*rightly dividing the word of truth.*” Do you? This is the only way to understand and enjoy the Bible—and live in obedience to it.

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1. It is instructive to note that the next time we find the Lord Jesus with a “book” in His hands is in Rev. 5:7, where we read of Him *opening* it (Rev. 6:1, etc.) and when He does, the long delayed “day of vengeance” then commences.

## THE STARTING POINT

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3).

This is *not* some goal to which we are to attain. This is *not* some high standard which we are to reach. Rather, this is where we *start* as believers, and it is here we would do well to *stand*, for on this standing we can rest quietly, wait patiently and “rejoice evermore.”

If we do not see and know this blessed truth of the believer’s perfect and complete standing *in Christ*, we start far below our privileges, and with all our efforts we shall never attain to anything like this height of blessing.

Our temptation, of course, is to focus on ourselves, but this can only cause disaster. To be occupied with our *state* is to shut out from view the *standing* which is ours *in Christ*. Then, instead of a life of “rejoicing” and “giving thanks” for what *God* has done, ours becomes a life of disappointments and regrets for what we have not done.

It is surely not by accident that Paul, after having enumerated a portion of our “all spiritual blessings,” would intensify his teachings and show forth their reality and depth by recording the Holy Spirit’s prayer for us through Him.

“That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of HIM:

“The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of HIS calling, and what the riches of the glory of HIS inheritance in the saints,

“And what is the exceeding greatness of HIS power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of HIS mighty power” (Eph. 1:17-19).

Notice carefully that from the very first petition our thoughts are taken entirely away from ourselves. He would teach us that God would have us taken up with *Himself*—with the knowledge of *Him*, of *His* calling, *His* inheritance, *His* power.

When the Holy Spirit thus prays for us, all is focused on what *God* has accomplished in Christ—and it is here that this divine prayer differs so greatly from all human prayers. We are full of ourselves—*our* needs, *our* blessings, the knowledge of *ourselves*, the

hope of *our* calling, *our* inheritance, *our* power. We are the center, the focus and the circumference which bounds our view.

It is only as we get to know *Him* and all that *He* is to us and all that *He* has for us that we can start from *His* purpose and not from ours; then—and only then—will we begin with *His fullness* and not our own need. In the words of Helen Lemmel's familiar verse:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,  
Look full in His wonderful face;  
And the things of earth grow strangely dim,  
In the light of His glory and grace.

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### "IF GOD BE FOR US"

"If God be for us, who can be against us?" asks the Apostle in Romans 8, and the chapter demonstrates how fully the triune God is indeed "for us." In verse 26 we see *God the Holy Spirit* "for us." In verse 31 we find *God the Father* "for us." Then in verse 34 *God the Son* is said to be "for us."

The Godhead is "for us" in our weakness, in our sickness, in our moments of loss and despair. When we doubt, God is still "for us." When we fail, He is "for us." When we fall, God is "for us." There is no time, no place, no condition in which God is not "for us." Such assurance should cause us to take courage and press on with confidence in Him alone!

Strength does not rise out of our inferiority or superiority, nor from the presence or the absence of our adversaries. It is not who is against us but who is "for us" that matters! And how do we know, how can we be assured that God is ever for us? The objective evidence unanswerably demonstrated in human history is given in the inspired words of verse 32:

"He that spared not his own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"

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