

# THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

By Richard Jordan

The Bible is the world's most marvelous book—all because it is God's book. It is wonderful that God wrote a book, even more that He has preserved it intact through history and has even provided for it to be translated into the languages of the nations. We have His Word, preserved for us and translated into our own language so we can hold it in our hands, read it and see for ourselves just what God has said. This is all a marvelous blessing! But there is more.

It is important to recognize that God has also provided us with a divinely prescribed method for understanding it. “*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable,*” II Timothy 3:16 declares. But if we are to gain the profit from God's Word that He has placed there for us, we must approach it in His way. Thus II Timothy 2:15 instructs:

“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”

Clearly our study of the Word is for the purpose of showing ourselves “approved unto God.” This is to be our one great goal, our objective: to have God's approval, to be workmen who need not be ashamed before Him. But how is this objective to be reached? The answer is given with equal clarity: “Rightly dividing the Word of truth.” This is the key to having God's approval on our life and service for Him—the key to understanding His Word.

“Rightly dividing the Word of truth” is a reference to the *dispensational approach* to studying the Bible<sup>1</sup> and it is clear that this is the correct approach if we are to have God's approval on our lives.

It is important to notice that Paul says, “*rightly* dividing the Word of truth.” The clear implication is that there is a *wrong* way to divide it. Paul does not, as many seem to suppose, simply say we are to make divisions in God's Word. No. We are to make right divisions—correct, proper distinctions. Great care is called for at this point for, remember, it is God's Word we are handling. This is not the word of a doctrinal statement, a church creed, or tradition of human viewpoint; this is the Word of Almighty God!

As we approach it, therefore, we want to approach it in God's way, properly recognizing the distinctions He has made in it. Just *how* to do this—that is the important question!

Since it is Paul who instructs us to rightly divide the Word, it would seem safe to ask Paul just *how* this should be done. So, instead of going to Darby, Scofield, Larkin, Hodges, Calvin, Strong or the like, let's turn to Paul and see if he can help us understand just how God's Word is to be “rightly divided.”

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<sup>1</sup> Lit., “cutting straight” (Gr. *Orthotomounta*). Perhaps because of a failure to appreciate the dispensational nature of Scripture in general and the immediate context of II Timothy 2:15 in particular, many modern translators and commentators unfortunately have abandoned the Greek reading and have followed the Latin Vulgate which reads, “*rightly handling*.”

## A THREE-FOLD DIVISION

God Himself never changes. In His person, essence and character He is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). His dealings with man, however have undergone various changes down through man's history—changes made necessary by changes in man himself. Identifying these changes is a basic issue in studying the Bible dispensationally<sup>2</sup> for a dispensation is a particular program that God administers (or dispenses) for man's obedience.

In Ephesians 2 the Apostle Paul gives us a panoramic view of his understanding of the way God's dealings with mankind have been divided. He does this by making a clear, distinct and easily identifiable three-fold division: *Time Past* (vs. 11,12), *But Now* (v. 13), *the Ages to Come* (v.7).

**Time Past:** During "Time Past" there was an unmistakable distinction made between the *circumcision* and the *uncircumcision*, between the nation Israel and the Gentiles.

“Wherefore remember, that YE BEING IN TIME PAST GENTILES IN THE FLESH, WHO ARE CALLED UNCIRCUMCISION BY THAT WHICH IS CALLED THE CIRCUMCISION IN THE FLESH MADE BY HANDS;

“THAT IN THAT TIME YE WERE WITHOUT CHRIST, BEING ALIENS FROM THE COMMONWEALTH OF ISRAEL, AND STRANGERS FROM THE COVENANTS OF PROMISE, HAVING NO HOPE, AND WITHOUT GOD IN THE WORLD” (Ephesians 2:11,12).

The terms *circumcision* and *uncircumcision* identify a basic physical, *racial and social distinction*; one that was “*in the flesh*” and “*made without hands*.” It was, in fact, so intense that they were calling each other names! But there was more:

In this “*time past*” status, the Gentiles were also spiritually alienated from God and thus said to be “without Christ.” This is said to be their condition because they were “*aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise*.”

Thus the *physical distinction* only pointed to the more important *spiritual alienation* the Gentile masses occupied in *Time Past*.

The basic issue in Time Past is this division between the circumcision and the uncircumcision, between Israel and the Gentiles. When you find this issue governing the way God was working with men, you know immediately you are in *Time Past*.

**But Now:** Ephesians 2:13 indicates that in the *But Now* period all this has changed. No longer are Gentiles considered “*far off*” but rather this distinction has been eliminated and now “*those who were far off are made nigh*.”

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<sup>2</sup> It is readily apparent that God's program for man has changed from time to time: Compare Exodus 31:15 with Colossians 2:16; Leviticus 11:7, 8 with I Timothy 4:4; Matthew 5:19 with Romans 6:14; Psalm 51:11 with Ephesians 4:30; Genesis 17:11 with Galatians 6:15, etc.

“BUT NOW IN CHRIST JESUS YE WHO WERE SOMETIMES FAR OFF ARE MADE NIGH BY THE BLOOD OF CHRIST.

“FOR HE IS OUR PEACE, WHO HATH MADE BOTH ONE, AND HATH BROKEN DOWN THE MIDDLE WALL OF PARTITION BETWEEN US” (Ephesians 2:13, 14).

So there is a *Time Past*, the basic characteristic of which is the *separation* between the circumcision and the uncircumcision, between the Jew and the Gentile. Then there is *But Now* where they are dealt with on an *equal basis* and in the same manner. During *But Now* there has been a change in the way God deals with the nations, for “*the middle wall of partition*” has been “broken down.” There is one remaining section:

**The Ages to Come:** Much is to come in the future as God brings His purposes to fruition and thus the final division:

“THAT IN THE AGES TO COME HE MIGHT SHEW THE EXCEEDING RICHES OF HIS GRACE IN HIS KINDNESS TOWARD US THROUGH CHRIST JESUS” (Ephesians 2:7).

Thus we have Paul’s *three-fold division*: *Time Past*, *But Now* and *the Ages to Come*. How can the Word of God be laid out according to that? Let’s see.

## TIME PAST

*Time Past* is marked by the basic characteristic of the *separation between circumcision and uncircumcision*. We know where circumcision came from. It began with Abraham as a sign of the covenant God made with him and his seed after him.

In Genesis 17 the Lord confirmed His covenant with Abram, changed his name to Abraham and instituted the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant—circumcision.

“And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations.

“This *is* my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; EVERY MAN CHILD AMONG YOU SHALL BE CIRCUMCISED.

“And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and IT SHALL BE A TOKEN OF THE COVENANT BETWIXT ME AND YOU.

“And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which *is* not of thy seed.

“He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, MUST NEEDS BE CIRCUMCISED: AND MY COVENANT SHALL BE IN YOUR FLESH FOR AN EVERLASTING COVENANT.

“AND THE UNCIRCUMCISED MAN CHILD WHOSE FLESH OF HIS FORESKIN IS NOT CIRCUMCISED, THAT SOUL SHALL BE CUT OFF FROM HIS PEOPLE: HE HATH BROKEN MY COVENANT” (Genesis 17:9-14).

Thus “*circumcision in the flesh made by hands*” was a sign of the *special status* given to the seed of Abraham by God. It was an outward sign of the spiritual privilege God had given to them and was a required mark of their identity and covenant privileges.

So the division between the circumcision and the uncircumcision began in the book of Genesis. It was there, with Abraham, that God began to erect “the middle wall of partition” between Jew and Gentile by giving to Abraham and his seed circumcision as “*the sign of the covenant*.” In Genesis 22: 17, 18 God states His purpose in that covenant—and in thus separating the nation Israel from all the other nations of the earth:

“That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which *is* upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies;

“AND IN THY SEED SHALL ALL THE NATIONS OF THE EARTH BE BLESSED; BECAUSE THOU HAS OBEYED MY VOICE.”

Numbers 23:9 declares concerning Israel’s special status:

“... LO, THE PEOPLE SHALL DWELL ALONE, AND SHALL NOT BE RECKONED AMONG THE NATIONS.”

God not only erected this “middle wall,” He also reinforced it by the giving of the law through Moses:

“Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the LORD my God commanded me, that ye should do so in the land whither ye go to possess it.

“Keep therefore and do *them*; for this *is* your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation *is* a wise and understanding people.

“FOR WHAT NATION IS THERE SO GREAT, WHO HATH GOD SO NIGH UNTO THEM, as the LORD our God *is* in all *things that* we call upon him *for*?

And WHAT NATION IS THERE SO GREAT, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day” (Deuteronomy 4:5-8).

We see from this that what is generally referred to as the “Old Testament” is in fact part of *Time Past*. But when does the change occur? When do we move into the *But Now* status? And what about the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ?

Paul sheds real light on this latter question when he writes:

“Now I say that JESUS CHRIST WAS A MINISTER OF THE CIRCUMCISION for the truth of God, to confirm the promises *made* unto the fathers” (Romans 15:8).

Note well that the character of our Lord’s ministry is defined as His being “*a minister of the circumcision*.” Thus we learn that the period covered by the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John is, in fact, part of *Time Past*. The distinction between the circumcision and the uncircumcision still formed the basis of God’s dealings with men at that time.

There is no way one can read the records of our Lord’s earthly ministry and fail to see this basic fact. For example, in His first great commission to His apostles, He declares:

“These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into *any* city of the Samaritans enter ye not:

“But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 10: 5 6.).

Later when they besought Him to work a miracle for a Gentile woman, He pointedly told them:

“But he answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24).

Further, John 4:22 records His words to the woman at the well in Samaria:

“Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: FOR SALVATION IS OF THE JEWS for salvation is of the Jews” (John 2:22).

Too often such passages are simply ignored—no doubt because they are not properly understood. Such plain words, however, cannot be gainsaid or mistaken. They mean what they say and their implication is clear: the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ demonstrates itself to be a part of *Time Past*. Thus the books of *Matthew, Mark, Luke and John* are properly placed in the *Time Past* division when we “rightly divide” the Word of truth.

The same is true of the early Acts period. In His post-resurrection commission our Lord clearly maintained the advantaged status of the circumcision:

“And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47).

After some 40 days of personal instruction from their resurrected Lord in things “pertaining to the Kingdom of God,” the apostles understood that the program of God still focused on Israel and her coming Kingdom:

“When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, LORD, WILT THOU AT THIS TIME RESTORE AGAIN THE KINGDOM TO ISRAEL?” (Acts 1:6)

That this understanding was in no way a mistake of human frailty is borne out by the fact that on the day of Pentecost, Peter, speaking “as the Spirit gave [him] utterance,” three times specifically *limits* his message to the nation Israel:

“But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said unto them, YE MEN OF JUDAEA, AND ALL YE THAT DWELL AT JERUSALEM, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words:”

“YE MEN OF ISRAEL, hear these words...”

“THEREFORE LET ALL THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL KNOW ASSUREDLY ...” (Acts 2:14, 22, 36)

Thus the understanding of Peter and the eleven as to just where they stood in the program of God gives clear evidence that they still functioned in the *Time Past* division, when Israel was still in the place of honor and advantage.

Peter is identified in Galatians 2:8 as *the apostle of the circumcision* and as such preached “the gospel of the circumcision” (Galatians 2:7). It is in this capacity and with this message that he declares to his nation:

“Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed.

“Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities” (Acts 3:25, 26).

Throughout their ministry as recorded in Acts, the Pentecostal believers declare their testimony that

“The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree.

“Him hath God exalted with his right hand *to be* a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:30, 31).

In fact, Israel’s special privileged position extended even after they were scattered from Jerusalem by persecution, for Acts 11:19 tells us:

Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, PREACHING THE WORD TO NONE BUT THE JEWS ONLY” (Acts 11:19).

The record is clear: The books of *Matthew, Mark, Luke and John* and the early part of the book of *Acts* properly belong in *Time Past*.

#### BUT NOW

When, then, does the change to the *But Now* position occur? When did the circumcision and the uncircumcision being reconciled into one Body begin to take place? Ephesians 3 makes this clear:

“For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles,

“IF YE HAVE HEARD OF THE DISPENSATION OF THE GRACE OF GOD WHICH IS GIVEN ME TO YOU-WARD:

“HOW THAT BY REVELATION HE MADE KNOWN UNTO ME THE MYSTERY; ...

“WHICH IN OTHER AGES WAS NOT MADE KNOWN UNTO THE SONS OF MEN, AS IT IS NOW REVEALED UNTO HIS HOLY APOSTLES AND PROPHETS BY THE SPIRIT;

“THAT THE GENTILES SHOULD BE FELLOWHEIRS, AND OF THE SAME BODY, AND PARTAKERS OF HIS PROMISE BY THE GOSPEL” (Ephesians 3:1-3, 5, 6).

From the record it is evident that the Apostle Paul was the instrument our ascended Lord used to initiate the program of grace for the Gentiles by way of message he calls “*the mystery*”—a secret purpose of God which He kept *hidden* in Himself until He revealed it to and then through the Apostle Paul.

With the raising up of Paul we move from *Time Past* into the *But Now* section and cross what in fact is the most important boundary line of the Bible—that between *prophecy* and *mystery* proclaimed by Paul. It is into these great subjects that the Bible is basically divided.

Manifestly there is a great difference between Peter’s preaching of “that which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began” (Acts 3:21) and Paul’s proclamation of “that which was kept secret since the world began” (Romans 16:25).

This secret message has to do with the breaking down of the middle wall of partition and the placing of the Jew and Gentile into one Body on an absolutely *equal basis* through simple faith in the cross-work of the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:13-22). How is it that this “mystery” message can now go to the Gentiles without regard to Israel’s former status? Romans 11 answers:

“I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but *rather* THROUGH THEIR FALL SALVATION IS COME TO THE GENTILES, for to provoke them to jealousy.

“...THE CASTING AWAY OF THEM [IS] THE RECONCILING OF THE WORLD, ...

“For I WOULD NOT, BRETHREN, THAT YE SHOULD BE IGNORANT OF THIS MYSTERY, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that BLINDNESS IN PART IS HAPPENED TO ISRAEL, UNTIL THE FULNESS OF THE GENTILES BE COME IN” (Romans 11:11, 15, 25).

Our Lord set the nation Israel aside during this Acts period and from heaven’s glory introduced a *new* program through a *new* apostle. With this new program we move into the But Now period and thus we read Paul now declaring:

“For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office: (Romans 11:13).

*Romans through Philemon* are the books, then, that fit into the *But Now* division. These are the books that detail what God is doing during the present dispensation of grace.

## THE AGES TO COME

After the present dispensation is brought to a conclusion, there is still much that God has to accomplish. Since His prophetic program for the nation Israel has currently been interrupted in order to form the Body Christ, the first order of business would logically be its completion.

Appropriately, the grouping of books following the Pauline epistles is called the *Hebrew Epistles*. They, in fact, fit doctrinally into *the Ages to Come*. Consider Hebrews 2:3,5:

“How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; WHICH AT THE FIRST BEGAN TO BE SPOKEN BY THE LORD [Matthew through John], and was CONFIRMED UNTO US BY THEM THAT HEARD HIM;

“For unto the angels hath he not put in subjection THE WORLD TO COME, WHEREOF WE SPEAK” (Hebrews 2:3,5).

The distinction between the circumcision and the uncircumcision is also again in vogue in the Hebrew Epistles, and thus we find such things as:

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, TO THE TWELVE TRIBES which are scattered abroad, greeting” (James 1:1).

“BUT YE ARE A CHOSEN GENERATION, A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD, AN HOLY NATION, A PECULIAR PEOPLE” (1 Peter 2:9).

## AN IMPORTANT QUESTION

Thus we see that the Word of God itself provides us with the key to its own proper understanding and right division.

**Time Past:** in *Matthew through John* we find the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ to the nation Israel. In the book of *Acts* we have the fall of Israel and salvation going to the Gentiles through the ministry of the Apostle Paul.

**But Now:** *Romans through Philemon* provide the doctrine for the present dispensation of grace.

**Ages to Come:** *Hebrews through Revelation* focus on the *ages to come* when God will bring to fruition His purposes for *both* the nation Israel and the Body of Christ.

We are not the only people in God's program and purpose. People in other ages need Scripture to instruct them in the specifics of God's dealings with them just as we do. Remember: All the Bible is *for us* but it is not all *to us* nor is it all *about us*. If we fail to recognize this important fact we will never be able to properly understand just what God is doing today nor will we know just what He would have us to do.

One important question remains: You are one of the *nations*. The Apostle Paul says unequivocally: "*I am the apostle of the Gentiles [the nations].*" Who, then, is *your* apostle? There can be no other answer but that Paul is our apostle, for he was raised up by our ascended Lord specifically that he "should be *the minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles*" (Romans 15:16).

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, HE THAT RECEIVETH WHOMSOEVER I SEND RECEIVETH ME; AND HE THAT RECEIVETH ME RECEIVETH HIM THAT SENT ME." (John 13:20).

Thus it is in Paul's writings alone that we find the doctrine, position, walk and destiny of the Body of Christ.