

Question: Today we use devices like clocks (wall clocks, wristwatches, or phone clocks) to tell seconds, minutes, and hours. But long ago, how did people know what time it was — especially without modern timepieces?

Answer: In Bible times, people understood that a day was divided into 12 hours of daylight and 12 hours of night. The Gospel of John records Jesus referring to this when He says:

“Jesus answered, ‘Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks around in the daytime will not stumble, because they see by this world’s light.’”
— John 11:9-10 (NIV)

This shows that people in Jesus’ day understood the idea of dividing the day into hours. But the Bible doesn’t describe ancient people dividing hours into minutes and seconds the way we do now. In other words, there was no concept of “seconds” in each hour in the way modern clocks measure them.

So, how did they know when one hour ended and another began,

finishing all 12 hours of day and night — even without a mechanical or digital clock?

Instead of wristwatches, ancient people used natural methods to divide the day into hours. These included observing the sun, tracking shadows, and using simple time-measuring tools.

Here are the main ways they did it:

1. Observing the Sun

At sunrise, they could tell the first hour of the day had begun. When the sun reached its highest point, they knew it was the sixth hour (around midday), and at sunset they knew it was the twelfth hour of the day. By estimating the sun's progress between these points, they could tell the approximate time of day.

2. Sundials

A sundial uses the length and direction of a shadow cast by the sun to mark the hours. This technique is mentioned in the Bible, for example when the shadow went backward on the stairway during the time of King Hezekiah (Isaiah 38:8).

3. Water Clocks

At night — when the sun couldn't be seen — people used devices where water dripped at a steady rate from one container to another. The level of water showed how much time had passed. These were commonly used in places like ancient Babylon.

4. Hourglasses (Sand Clocks)

Sand was allowed to fall slowly from one bulb to another through a narrow neck, measuring the passage of time.

5. Star Positions

At night people also observed the positions of stars or star clusters (like Orion) to estimate the time. Different constellations appeared in the sky at different hours of the night.

So in short, people in Bible times mainly relied on the sun, shadows, and simple tools to divide the day into hours. They did not measure seconds the way we do today.

What Did People in the Past Use to Tell Hours, Minutes, and Seconds?

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