

Ages and Dispensations

What do these words mean and what is their importance and significance in studying the Bible? The word, "*dispensation*" occurs four times in the New Testament: in 1 Corinthians 9:17; Ephesians 1:10; and 3:2; and Colossians 1:25. The Greek word from which this word is translated means – "*economy,*" or "*stewardship,*" primarily referring to "*the managing of a house or household.*"

As applied to God's activities it is a study of how God is managing His great universal household, of His various methods of dealing with all intelligences under His moral sway, both angels and men, of His great plan of redemption, of His testing of men for place in His great future perfect Kingdom. As applied to the bible it reveals the different classes of people God addresses – and the various periods marked off by the Lord for the accomplishing of His purpose. To visibly get the picture given throughout God's Word one needs to make the necessary distinction in order to "*rightly divide the word of truth*" (2 Timothy 2:15). This implies a diligent study and application of our God-given mental faculties in order to have a proper apprehension of the meaning of God's revelation.

God is constantly addressing Himself to our common sense, to our intelligence, as for example in Isaiah 1:18, where He says, "*Come now, let us reason together.*" Let us respond and endeavor to find out what He has to say to us.

2 Timothy 2:15 likens the Bible student to a "*workman*" with his tools in hand fashioning a clear understanding of the Word which will meet with the approval of God and bring commendation and not shame. This workman is to "*rightly divide*" *the word of truth.*" To "*rightly divide*" means to "*make a straight cut.*" If he were a plowman, he is to make a straight furrow – if he were a mason, he is to cut his stones evenly – if he were a tentmaker, he is to cut straight the camel's hair cloth – if he be a Bible study, he must produce a correct interpretation.

2 Corinthians 4:2 suggests the possibility of "*handling the Word of God deceitfully.*" 2 Peter 3:16, speaks of some things in Scripture "*being hard to understand*" and that "*unlearned and unstable*" men can "*wrest (twist) the Scriptures to their own destruction.*" What a solemn warning to seek to understand correctly the Word of God. How important it is to lay aside all preconceived opinions, notions, and prejudices and carefully examine Scripture as to its true meaning.

Before proceeding our study of dispensational periods we need a few brief rules to arrive at proper conclusions in Biblical interpretation. Things to be avoided in handling the Word of God:

1. Misinterpreted Scripture

For example the Parable of the Leaven in Matthew 13:33 has been interpreted to say the "*woman*" is the church, which takes the "*leaven,*" which represents the Gospel, and puts it into "*three measures of meal,*" which, some teach represents the world, converted to the truth.

The Gospel is *good*, whereas, "*leaven*" is consistently used throughout the Scriptures to mean something "*evil,*" something to be avoided. Exodus 12:8, and 15-20 forbids the use of leaven in the Passover, and offerings of the Old Testament because leaven represented sin. In Mark 8:15 and Matthew 16:11-12,

Jesus said "*leaven*" was a symbol of the false doctrines of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 uses leaven to symbolize "*malice and wickedness*" The point is, If God uses the same symbol to represent both good and evil, there could be no sound basis for a safe and sane interpretation of his Word. All Scripture must agree – "*line upon line and precept upon precept!*"

2. **Misapplied Scripture**

Some teachers have a tendency to extreme spiritualization, giving meaning other than the clear literal sense to certain passages. Passages in the Old Testament that clearly refer to Israel are made to apply to the Church. The consequence of this wrong application is that the nation of Israel is cut off from her blessing of restoration to divine favor clearly foretold in the Word.

We must clearly distinguish between language that is *literal* and that which is *figurative* or representative. That which is literal (according to the letter) comprehends the plain, common-sense, obvious significance of the words as usually understood, not metaphorical.

There, of course, is figurative, symbolic, language in Scripture. For instance, in John 10:9 Jesus said, "*I am the door,*" and in John 10:9, "*I am the bread of life.*" These scriptures do not mean that Christ is a literal door, but like a door into the sheepfold, He is the entrance into the realm of eternal life; nor that He is literal bread but that He is life bread in that He sustains our spiritual life as we feed on Him and His words. A symbol is an animate or inanimate object that is thrown or placed alongside of something else for the sake of comparison or representation. For example, in the 2nd and 7th chapters of Daniel, the kingdoms of the Gentile world from Nebuchadnezzar down to the second coming of Christ are first represented as an image composed of various metals and then as wild beasts devouring each other.

3. **Dislocated Scripture**

As an example of this, 2 Peter 3:10-14 tells of the final renovation of the Heavens and Earth by fire, resulting in a New Heaven and a New Earth wherein dwelleth righteousness. The question is, "*When will this be accomplished?*" Some put the time of the fulfillment of this Scripture the close of this dispensation of Grace. The problem is that this *dislocation* of Scripture fulfillment gives no place to the Millennium, the restoration of the Jews and the reign of Christ on the throne of David. The proper time of fulfillment of this renewal of heaven and Earth is at the close of the thousand year's rule of Christ. (Revelation 20:11 and 21:1).

It is important to understand God's arrangement in dealing with mankind and to put Scripture in its proper location.

4. **Distinguish between classes of people**

We must distinguish three main classes of people to whom God addresses Himself in the Scriptures – the Jews, the Gentiles, and the Church (2 Corinthians 10:32). The necessity of knowing to which one of these classes a particular passage of the Word of God is addressed much be obvious to the student of Scripture.

Scriptures divide time – (the period from the creation of Adam to the “new Heavens and a new Earth, of Revelation 21:1) – into seven unequal periods, called “*Dispensations*.” These periods are marked off in Scripture by some change in God’s method of dealing with mankind, or a portion of mankind, in respect to the two questions: (1) sin and (2) man’s responsibility. Each of the dispensations may be regarded as a new test of the natural man, and each dispensation ends in judgment – marking man’s utter failure in every dispensation.

Getting a Bird's-eye View of God's Plan for Ages

Five of these dispensations, or periods of time, have been fulfilled; we are living in the sixth, evidently toward its close, and have before us the seventh, and last – the Millennium!

1. INNOCENCE

This dispensation extends from the creation of Adam (Genesis 2:7) to the expulsion from Eden. Adam, created innocent, and ignorant of good and evil, was placed in the Garden of Eden with his wife, Eve, and put under responsibility to abstain from the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The Dispensation of Innocence resulted in the first failure of man, and in its far-reaching effects, the most disastrous. It closed in judgment – “*So He [God] drove out the man...*” (See, Genesis 1:26; 2:16-17; 3:6; and 3:22-24).

2. CONSCIENCE

When Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s clear command, they transmitted a nature of disobedience to the entire human race. Man acquired the “*knowledge of good and evil*,” giving him responsibility to do good and shun evil. The result of this Dispensation of Conscience, from Eden to the Flood (while there was no institution of government and of law), was that “*all flesh had corrupted his way on the earth*” that “*the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of thoughts of his heart was only evil continual*,” and God closed the second testing of the natural man with judgment – the Flood. (See, Genesis 3:7,22; 6:5, 11-12; and 7:11-12, 23).

3. GOVERNMENT

God spared Noah and his family out of the fearful judgment of the Flood. After the waters subsided, God gave them the purified earth with ample instructions to govern it. Man was responsible to set up “*Human Government*.” God also instructed man to “*be fruitful and multiply and replenish the whole earth*,” however, because of man’s sinful nature of disobedience he attempts to become independent of God. God closed this dispensation in judgment – the Confusion of Tongues (See, Genesis 9:1-2 and 11:1-8).

4. PROMISE

After the descendants of the human race were dispersed as a result of the tower of Babel, God called a man, Abram (his name was changed later to Abraham) and enters into a covenant. Some of the promises God made to Abram and his descendants were purely because of His grace and *unconditional*. [These either have been, or will yet be, literally fulfilled.] Other promises were *conditional* upon the faithfulness and obedience of the Israelites. Israel violated every one of these

conditions, and the Dispensation of Promise resulted in failure and closed in the judgment of Bondage in Egypt.

The book of Genesis opens with the sublime words, *“In the beginning God created”* but, closes with, *“In a coffin in Egypt.”*
(See, Genesis 12:1-3; 15:5; 26:3; 28:12-13; 13:14-17 and Exodus 1:13-14)

5. LAW

again, God's wonderful grace came to the help of helpless man and redeemed the chosen people out of the hand of the oppressor. In the wilderness God proposed to them the Covenant of Law. Instead of humbly pleading for a continued relation of grace, they presumptuously answered, *“All that the Lord hath spoken we will do.”* The history of Israel in the wilderness and in the land that God had promised, is one long record of flagrant, persistent violation of the Law, and at last, after multiplied warnings, God closed the testing of man by Law in judgment; Israel, and Judah were driven out of the Land into a dispersion which continues today. (See, Exodus 19:1-8; Romans 3: 19-10 and 10:5; Acts 2:22-23 and 7:51-52; Galatians 3:10 and 2 Kings 25:1-11)

6. GRACE (or, Church Age)

The sacrificial death of the Lord Jesus Christ introduced the dispensation of God's grace – which means undeserved favor, or God giving righteousness, instead of God *requiring* righteousness, as under the Law.

Salvation, perfect and eternal, is now freely offered to Jew and Gentile upon the acknowledgment of sin, or repentance, with *faith* in Christ.

*“Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God that ye **BELIEVE** on Him whom He hath send”* (John 6:29).

*“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that **BELIEVETH** on Me has everlasting life”* (John 6:47).

*“Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that hears My word, and **BELIEVETH** Him that send Me, hath eternal life, and cometh not into judgment, but hath passed out of death into life”* (John 5:24).

*“For my grace have ye been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the **gift** of God: not of works, that no man should glory”* (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The predicted result of this testing of man under grace is judgment upon an unbelieving world and an apostate Church. (See, Luke 18:8; Luke 17:26-30; 2 Thessalonians 2:7-12; and Revelation 3:15-16.)

The first event in the closing of this dispensation will be the descent of the Lord from Heaven (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). Then follows the brief period called “the great tribulation” (Matthew 24:21-22; Daniel 12:1; Zephaniah 1:15-18 and Jeremiah 3:50-57).

After this occurs – the personal return of the Lord Jesus Christ to the earth in power and great glory – and then the judgments which introduce the seventh, and last dispensation.

7. MILLENNIUM (or, Kingdom Age)

After the purifying judgments that attend the personal return of Christ to the earth, He will reign over restored Israel and over the earth for one thousand years. This is the period known as the Millennium. The seat of Christ's power will be Jerusalem, and the saints, including the saved of the Dispensation of Grace, that is, the *Church*, will be associated with Him in His glory. (See, Acts 15:14-17; Revelation 19:11-21 and 20:1-6; Isaiah 2:1-4 and the entire 11th chapter of Isaiah).