

## **DISPENSATIONALISM**

(God's Plan of the Ages)

Pastor Kelly Sensenig

God's dispensational program for history and prophecy has been called God's plan of the ages. Dispensationalism is the study of God's oversight of history and the future – from Adam to the End Times. Dispensations are how God superintends (manages and oversees) mankind as he lives on earth. They refer to God's dealings with mankind throughout all past recorded history and the future. Dispensationalism is the system of theology that provides the best and most literal hermeneutic (method of Bible interpretation). It does not allegorize or spiritualize the Bible by changing certain texts and their meanings from the original author's intent and purpose for writing them. It interprets the Bible from an historical, grammatical, and literal perspective in order to maintain God's original meaning of Bible texts and events.

A working definition would be this. Dispensationalism is a stewardship, or the way God chooses to work (God's economies) throughout the course of human history. To state it succinctly, God works in different ways, with different people, at different times throughout the course of human history (His-story). His plan is not always the same and the manner in which He chooses to work is often different and unique.

Dispensationalism sees Biblical divisions that God has made throughout the Bible and bases its interpretation of the Bible on these distinctions. Its watchword or core belief is to keep "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15) which means to literally "cut the Bible straight" through proper interpretation that pertains to grammar, history, and literalness. God is a God of sense, not nonsense!

Dr. David L. Cooper, the founder of The Biblical Research Society, was proficient in the Biblical languages. He studied Greek under Dr. A. T. Robertson. Dr. Cooper is known for his "Golden Rule of Interpretation" which is as follows:

“When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense,  
Seek no other sense; Therefore, take every word,  
At its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning,  
Unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light,  
Of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths,  
Indicate clearly otherwise.”

Although Paul and the early Church understood that God had a working plan of stewardships through the ages (1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 1:10; 3:2; Col. 1:25) these special workings of God, which were seen as divisions within God’s plan of the ages, became popularly defined as a system of Bible interpretation in the Brethren movement of Britain in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Men such as John Nelson Darby, William Kelly, William Trotter and Charles Mackintosh were strong supporters of dispensational teaching. Of course, the dispensational understanding of the Bible existed before Darby.

In Christian theological circles discussion, critics of dispensationalism have often argued that John Darby was the originator of the pretribulational rapture and dispensationalism. William Watson has spent over twenty years working through little known theological works of the 17th and 18th century. In his book, “Dispensationalism Before Darby” he drew from primary sources to demonstrate that Darby's perspectives were not aberrant nor did they originate with him. Instead, he followed a long list of individuals centuries before who anticipated the restoration of the Jews to their national homeland and believed in the imminent return of Christ. The evidence cannot be ignored. Dispensational premillennialism was not invented by Darby. So, with the bogus claim proved wrong that pretribulationalism and dispensationalism are new perspectives, hopefully the concentration in eschatological questions will be on exegesis of the Bible itself and not false theories about dispensational premillennialism.

The writings of learned men influenced and impacted evangelical dispensationalism. This was especially true in the United States. D. L. Moody, A. J. Gordon, and C. I. Scofield learned from the writings of the Plymouth Brethren. Bible Conferences sprang up within the United States in the early 1870's and C. I. Scofield was a participant in this movement.

All the major Bible Conferences taught and preached dispensational truth which became famous throughout the United States. In 1909, C. I. Scofield produced a dispensational system of interpretation focusing on God's plan of the ages. This system was soon tagged as dispensationalism and was taught in Bible Conferences across America and mainstream Protestantism. A great many Bible institutes have taught this honest system of interpretation (Moody Bible Institute, Bible Institute of Los Angeles, Talbot School of Theology, Philadelphia College of Bible, Dallas Theological Seminary). These schools were the direct results of the Bible Conference movement.

We should believe in the dispensational approach to understanding the Scripture and teach it today. We should be dispensationalists because the Bible does speak of the “dispensations” (1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 1:10; 3:2; Col. 1:25) and the subject of dispensationalism. This system has been dubbed “Scofieldism” and other names to indicate that a dispensational view of history and prophecy is not scriptural. However, the literal interpretation of Scripture which produces the dispensations is actually God’s hermeneutical system that He gave us to properly understand the Bible. It is God's system which He has chosen to use with His dealings among mankind. The early Church was taught dispensational truth and understood the dispensational character and nature of the Scriptures (Ephesians 1:10, 3:2; I Corinthians 9:17; Colossians 1:25; Acts 15:13-18; Romans 6:14) even though they may not have developed a theological system.

Clement of Alexandria (150-220 A.D) believed in several distinct ways of working in the world as God executes His plan for history. Augustine used the term dispensation when referring to the different ways God has worked. The French philosopher Pierre Poiret (1646-1710) developed a genuine, seven, dispensational scheme in a systematic fashion (*“Divine Economy: or A Universal System of the Works and Purposes of God Towards Men Demonstrated”*). In 1699 John Edwards (1639-1716) developed a dispensational work (*“A Complete History or Survey of All the Dispensations”*). Isaac Watts (1674-1748 A.D) presented a system of six dispensations in *“The Harmony of all the Religions which God ever Prescribed to Men and all his Dispensations towards them.”* Yes, it’s a bit wordy!

As previously mentioned, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Plymouth brethren and one of their key leaders, John Nelson Darby (1800-1892), played a significant role in the developing, systematizing, and spreading of Dispensational Theology. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was promoted further through C.I Scofield and the Scofield reference Bible. Scofield had been taught the Scriptures and Dispensationalism by the famous Presbyterian pastor and Bible teacher Dr. James H. Brookes. The rise of Bible and prophecy conferences and the Bible shock movement since the late 1800's has also spread Dispensation Theology.

Over time, there were some teachings which the Church needed to revive. Because of neglect, false teaching, Romanism and the Dark Ages, the Church would need to revive such teachings as justification by faith alone in Christ (Martin Luther and Reformation), the study of prophecy and End Time events (19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) and the study of dispensational truth (19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries). The early church believed in the basics of these teachings, but time, false teaching, and Romanism merely caused these truths to be swept under the carpet. The Bible Conference movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries which emphasized Dispensationalism and prophecy were merely a return to the basic, historic teachings of the early, apostolic Church.

The Greek word for dispensation as used in the Bible is "oikonomia" from which we derive our word economy. The word means to manage, regulate, administer and plan as one would manage a household or household affairs. So, a house manager is the basic understanding of this word. As previously mentioned, the word itself points to an economy or stewardship whereby God works in a certain way. The dispensations are merely the ways in which God works, manages, plans or arranges the relationship of human beings to himself. Renald Showers defined a dispensation as "a particular way of God's administering His rule over the world as He progressively works out His purpose for the world history." Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God through the different ways He administers His rule over the world.

Dr. Ryrie presents this concise definition of a dispensation:

"A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose."

He then adds:

"Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In this household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the process of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose, and these economies are the dispensations. The understanding of God's differing economies is essential to a proper interpretation of His revelation within those various economies."

William Barrick illustrates a dispensation or stewardship in this way:

"Modern fathers employ the same concept when explaining to a 22-year old son his responsibility to live under house rules as long as he chooses to live under his parents' roof. In the theological equivalent, God uses oral and/or written revelation to explain His will to His people, so that they might know how to live for Him. With new or added revelation, the requirements might change for the subsequent period of time."

As we view God's dispensational program (focusing on God's plan of the ages), we will discover that God has uniquely arranged, planned, or regulated His dealings with mankind all throughout history and will do so in the future. There are changes in the household rules as the dispensations progress.

Roy L. Aldrich emphasizes the hermeneutics of dispensationalism:

"Dispensationalism is a system of biblical interpretation that sees God working with mankind in different ways at different times in history. It is based on a consistent, literal interpretation of Scripture."

This system of interpretation sees God's covenant programs given specifically to Israel (Rom. 9:4). The Church is a distinct group of people that God is working with today which did not exist in the Old Testament (Eph. 3:1-10). It recognizes a future for Israel in the land of Palestine (Rom.

11:1-2, 26). In short, dispensationalism does not mix the people of Israel and the Church but sees them as a different groups of people throughout Scripture (1 Cor. 10:32). It makes a distinction between the Rapture (Christ's coming *for* His Church to take them to Heaven) and the Revelation (Second Coming – Christ's coming *with* His Church to earth). It also makes a distinction between the judgment program of God since different people (Jews, Gentiles, Church) will be dealt with in different ways at different times. This is because dispensationalism follows a literal hermeneutic and separates the different groups of people that God has worked with in the past, the present, and will work with in the future.

The basic beliefs of Dispensational Theology find their basis in the Bible. Therefore, the only fair and logical system of Bible interpretation is the dispensational approach. It is a consistent and literal interpretation, which rightly divides the Bible (2 Timothy 2:15), instead of wrongly dividing the Scriptures through allegorical interpretation. Dispensationalism recognizes the obvious distinctions between the covenants given to Israel, the resurrections, judgments, law and grace, sabbath, the Lord's Day, Israel and the Church.

Dispensationalism is a system of interpretation which does not seek to spiritualize or allegorize the Bible, especially the Book of Revelation, into meaningless symbols. It views the book of Revelation as possessing a literal and futuristic meaning. It is the system that results in pre-tribulationism (Christ returning in the Rapture *before* a seven-year Tribulation Period) and pre-millennialism (Christ returning in His Second Coming *before* a literal Millennium). It views the covenant program, promises, and prophecies of God to be literally fulfilled in Israel's future (Rom. 9-11).

In addition, dispensationalism does not promote Dominion Theology (Christian reconstructionism) which has as its goal to transform a wicked society and bring in the kingdom (postmillennialism). Of course, mankind was given the mandate to rule over the earth and animals (Gen. 1:26-28; Ps. 8:6-8), but he was not given a mandate to rule over men. The time the Church will rule over the earth is during the Millennium (Rev. 2:26-27; 5:10; 20:1-7). Today the calling of the Church is not to return to the Law and reconstruct society and gain world dominance and conquest by enforcing

God's Law on society. The Church is not the instrument to establish the earthly Kingdom. Only Jesus can bring in the Kingdom (Dan. 7:13-14; Rev. 19:11-21). Our responsibility is to share the Gospel and make disciples of Jesus Christ (Matt. 28:19-20).

The *continuity* between the storyline of Old and New Testaments is embraced by dispensationalists. Dispensationalism does not change the story! It does not alter what came before but continues to see the same truths taught in the New Testament. The basic teachings of ethnic Israel (Rom. 9-11), her restoration to the physical land to experience her kingdom program and promises (Ezek. 11:17-20; 36:24-28 with Rom. 11:26-27), the Day of the Lord (Tribulation Period – Isa. 13:9-11; 14:21-23; 34:1-5 with 1 Thess. 5; 2 Thess. 2), the subject of the earthly theocracy or Millennium (Ps. 2; 72; 110; Isa. 2; 11; 25 with Matt. 10:28; Rev. 19:15; 20:1-7; Matt. 3:2; 4:17; Acts 1:6), salvation by grace through faith (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3), and the glory of God (Eph. 3:21) are consistent and unchanging themes between the testaments.

But dispensationalism with its consistent literalism (not wooden literalism for it recognizes figures of speech) also sees a *discontinuity* (a difference and distinct break) between Israel and the Church, the Mosaic and New Covenant, the people of God, the role of the Holy Spirit in the testaments (John 14:16-17), and the dispensations which span the ages (Eph. 3:1-10; 5:32; Eph. 1:10; Rom. 10:4; Heb. 9:15). The ethnicity of people and covenant promises from Old to New Testament do not magically change their identities and original goals. With Dispensationalism, what you see is what you get in the Bible in both Old and New Testaments. The true meaning is on the surface, and it does not change. It is not hidden in the allegorical interpretations of Reformed and Covenant Theology, especially as it pertains to Israel, God's covenants, and eschatological programs.

Second Timothy 2:15 declares that we must "rightly divide" (literally "cut straight") the Scriptures. We must cut or divide the Word of God straight. This involves proper hermeneutics and a careful analysis of dispensational distinctives and differences. To ignore the different stewardships will breed confusion. One of the early church fathers by the name of Augustine said: "Distinguish the dispensations and you will understand the Scriptures."

Sadly, Augustine abandoned dispensational and premillennial teaching and began to follow allegorical teaching. Unfortunately, the Reformers heavily borrowed from Augustine's later writings and followed his teachings. During the period known as the Reformation, the acceptance of Augustinianism resulted in the allegorical teaching related to God's covenants, Israel, the Church, prophecy of the Tribulation Period, and the Millennium. The literal meanings and understanding of these terms and God's plan of the ages was abandoned.

Covenant Theology is the great opponent of Dispensationalism. It was introduced to America primarily through the Puritans. The flaw of Covenant Theology is that this system of interpretation is based on two covenants. There is a Covenant of Works (up to Adam's fall) and a Covenant of Grace (redemption) which begins with Adam's sin and covers the rest of the Bible. Covenant Theology interprets everything in the Bible through the eyes of these covenants which are not even mentioned as covenants in Scripture! For this reason, the entire premise and system is flawed. It does not begin with the right interpretation of Scripture, and this leads to other misguided interpretations of the Bible regarding people and prophecies related to God's plan of the ages.

The Reformed Theology tradition of Augustine and Calvin are widely accepted today. It lumps all people together in one category, views the salvation of this one people as God's plan and therefore neglects the Biblical differences between Jews, Gentiles, and the Church (1 Cor. 10:32; Rom. 11:7-28; Acts 15:14-18). It is a system of interpretation which spiritualizes/allegorizes certain portions of the Bible, especially in the areas of the identity of Israel and prophecies regarding Israel and the future.

Although this system of interpretation sees some dispensations and differences in the way God has chosen to work, it considers all the dispensations as one big dispensation called the "Covenant of Grace" for the purpose of redemption. According to this system, each covenant that is actually named in the Bible is another stage in the progressive revelation of the unnamed Covenant of Grace! All the covenants mentioned in the Bible (Abrahamic, Palestinian, Davidic, Sinaitic, and New) are to be seen as a continuation and extension (a newer phase) of the Covenant of Grace



which is not mentioned in the Bible! Although Covenant Theologians observe differences in the progress of revelation, they stress similarity over differences. In an effort to unify and simplify the general theme of grace throughout the ages, they end up allegorizing ethnic Israel and her God-given promises.

This interpretive system denies any future covenant program for Israel and claims that the Church today is fulfilling the Old Testament promises given to Israel in an allegorical way (Replacement Theology). According to this view, the Church was in the Old Testament as the old Israel and the New Testament Church is really the new Israel which is simply an ongoing extension of the Old Testament Israel. Reformed Theology reads the New Testament back into the Old Testament (putting the Church in the Old Testament) to create an alleged uniformity of God's one people and purpose in the Covenant of Grace. I call this the forced interpretive process of reverse osmosis (reading New Testament truth back into the Old Testament) to create an allegorical understanding of literal, Old Testament concepts and teachings.

It should be noted that the spiritual equality of the Church (both Jews and Gentiles in the Body of Christ) within the New Testament does not mean Gentiles become Israel as non-dispensationalists claim (Gal. 3:28; 1 Cor. 12:13). Ethnic identities still exist within the broader concept of the people of God which means that Israel as a national people will still have a functional role of leadership and service in the nations when Jesus comes to reign upon the earth (Isa. 2:2-4). This will occur during the Millennium (Michael Vlach).

John MacArthur correctly asks:

"You show me in that verse, in the Old Testament, which promises a kingdom to Israel, where it says that it really means the Church--show me!" Where does it say that? On what exegetical basis, what historical, grammatical, literal, interpretative basis of the Scripture can you tell me that when God says "Israel" He means the "Church"? Where does it say that? That's where the burden of proof really lies. A straightforward understanding of the Old Testament leads to only one conclusion and that is that there is a kingdom for Israel."

The teaching of Reformed Theology also denies a literal Rapture, Tribulation, Millennium and spiritualizes all the great prophecies dealing with these events and time periods because of its interpretive approach to unify all people throughout history and stick to the one theme of redemptive grace.

In the name of continuity, Reformed Covenantal Theology allegorizes the covenant promises and prophecies related to Israel and reassigns them to the Church. This cancels out a future for ethnic Israel and the literal End Time prophecies related to Israel's future. Without taking the Scriptural promises and prophecies literally, Covenant Theologians do not know what to do with the book of Revelation other than to view it *historically* in the events of Church history or as referring to the specific time of Israel's A.D. 70 judgment (Preterism). Others view it *idealistically* (spiritually or allegorically as the struggle between right and wrong throughout the ages). These views reject the literal and futuristic nature of Bible prophecy assigning a spiritual meaning to the Millennium or 1,000 years (Christ reigning over His saints today). However, Hebrews 6:5 calls the Millennium "the age to come" which means that there is no present fulfillment of the Millennium, as Reformed Theology asserts, with Christ in Heaven ruling over His Church.

Covenant and Reformed Theology possesses a narrow and limited view of God's plan of the ages. God's goal throughout history is not merely to save people but to carry out many other specific and different purposes related to nations (Isa. 14:24-27; Jer. 10:7, Dan. 2:36-45; Rom. 11:26), rulers (Isa. 44:28-45:7; Dan. 4:17; Rev. 13:1-5), Satan (John 12:31; Rev. 12:7-10; 20:1-3), people (1 Cor. 10:32), and even nature (Isa. 35:1; Matt. 19:28; Acts 3:19-21; Rom. 8:19-22). The focus of God is not merely on the salvation of men. He also has specific programs of judgment related to both God's people and the unsaved (1 Cor. 3:9-15; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 6-19; Rev. 20:11-15). I don't mean to be sacrilegious, but God can walk and chew gum at the same time! He is a God of variety and has different programs occurring throughout the ages with different people that are not interrelated to an imaginary Covenant of Grace.

Hyper (Extreme) Dispensationalism is a system tied to Ethelbert Bullinger and therefore dubbed Bullingerism. It is also termed as Ultra-Dispensationalism or "Grace Teaching," because it is over critical of the divisions in the Scriptures, assigning the Grace Age to later in the book of Acts (Acts 28) which is outlined in the Prison Epistles. Extreme dispensationalism seeks to create a separate "kingdom church" in the early part of the book of Acts which is composed only of Jews. They eliminate the Gospel records as applying to the Church of today and conclude that the Great Commission passages, water baptism, and the Lord's Supper only apply to a separate kingdom church – not the Church of today.

In other words, according to the hyper dispensationalists these Scriptures are not relevant for this age. This approach to the Scripture causes confusion and controversy where there is to be none. The Bible only speaks of one church (Matt. 16:18, Acts 2:47; Eph. 1:22). Paul said he persecuted this same Church before his conversion (Gal. 1:13; 1 Cor. 15:9; Phil. 3:6). He does not differentiate between the Church. The normal way to interpret these passages is that this was the same Church to which he was now ministering and preaching. Paul also taught the mystery about the Church before his Roman imprisonment (Rom. 16:25-27) and taught the truth regarding the body of Christ and Spirit baptism long before he went to prison (1 Cor. 12:13). The time of the Holy Spirit living in the believer occurred long before the book of Acts ended (John 14:20; Acts 1:5, Acts 2, 11:15-16). The plain understanding of certain passages related to the Church age are misconstrued by the extreme dispensational dividers and writers.

Progressive Dispensationalism differs in some ways from the original dispensational approach to the Scriptures. The "adjective" progressive refers to a central tenant that the spiritual aspects of the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New covenants are being progressively filled today in this present age in various ways. The problem with Progressive Dispensationalism is that it attempts to merge the Church into the covenant promises which were given to Israel and base this finding upon Hebrews 8:8-12, applying Old Testament truth for the Church today.

Of course, the church today can be part of Abraham's spiritual seed (Gal. 3:29) in the sense of enjoying the salvation promised through the Messiah and can be beneficiaries of Israel's New Covenant (1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 12:24) without supplanting or superseding Israel and her identity, through the spiritualizing of Israel's national and earthly promises and reapplying them to the Church today. The Church's connection with the New Covenant comes through faith in Christ. The New Testament recognizes that salvation is of the Jews (John 4:22) but it does so without concluding that the Church appeared in the Old Testament in some other form and that it somehow inherits Israel's covenant promises through progressivism or total Replacement Theology.

Progressive Dispensationalism concludes that the Church is not a distinct group of people in contrast to Israel and Gentiles but is seen as a continuing redeemed humanity (the people of God) in the current dispensation. However, the Bible argues that Israel is totally distinct from the Church and Gentile peoples in relation to identity and purpose (1 Cor. 10:32). Although the church is not a separate race of humanity, it still has a distinct purpose in the plan and purpose of God. Yes, the church is "the new people of God" (a new man and one body – Eph. 2:15-16) that He is working with today, but it is not Israel remade over (the new Israel). It is a brand-new people with a distinct purpose and destiny. There is no reason to generalize the biblically and clearly marked distinctions between these groups of people without muddying the waters between Reformed and Dispensational Theology.

This scheme of interpretation also tries to argue that Jesus Christ is presently seated upon the throne of David in Heaven and has in some sense already inaugurated the Davidic Kingdom. This kind of reasoning is trying to accommodate Reformed Theology and begins to run dangerously close to the concept that the promises of the Davidic Covenant to Israel are fulfilled in the present-day church. It begins to blur distinctions between the Church and Israel and their distinct promises. The Bible is very clear that the rule of Christ on the Throne of David has only a future and earthly aspect attached to it.

Revelation 3:21

“To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne (*Christ’s earthly throne in fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant*), even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne (*the heavenly throne which is contrasted to the earthly throne*).

Luke 1:32-33 placed David’s throne to the earth – not Heaven:

"He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end."

The heavenly throne that Jesus occupies today relates to His *deity* and has nothing to do with the *Davidic* throne since this throne relates only to His earthly rule in Jerusalem.

Once again, Dispensationalism is a Biblical approach to understanding the Scriptures because the very word dispensation appears in the Bible which is an indication of specifically marked stewardships or different ways that God has worked throughout the ages (Ephesians 1:10, 3:2; I Corinthians 9:17; Colossians 1:25).

Michael Vlach states:

“A dispensation is a noticeable era when God administers and deals with His creation in a unique way.”

The Bible clearly defines three stewardships or dispensations. We will start with the stewardships and divisions which are clearly marked out in Scripture and then mention some other specific divisions we see in the Bible, which helps us to understand the Scriptures in a dispensational way, with the intent that we might see God’s working plan of the ages and His manifold wisdom. The section of our study will consist of a simple overview of the dispensations.

### ➤ **DISPENSATION OF THE LAW**

In Galatians 3, Paul was speaking about God’s law, which from a historic perspective was a dispensation of condemnation that brought judgment against the people (Gal. 3:10). It’s unfortunate that Israel misinterpreted

the purpose of the Law and sought a righteousness by good deeds and ceremonial ordinances rather than by God's grace (Romans 9:31—10:3; Acts 15:1). Because they were focused on attaining their own righteousness before God through legalism, they rejected their Messiah (John 1:11).

Paul explains the era of the Mosaic Law as a dispensation by using the analogy of a stewardship.

Galatians 4:1-2

“Now I say, *That* the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all; But is under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father.”

The English word "governors" is the Greek term "oikonomos." Paul uses this word when speaking about the era or Dispensation of the Law (Mosaic Covenant). Thus, in Galatians 4:2 the word "governors" means stewards and is the basic word which means a stewardship or house manager. Here we discover that the previous period of the Law was likened to a dispensation or administration that in some sense enslaved people under their sin until the Deliverer (Christ) came. The Law was the “guardian” that disciplined the nation of Israel and prepared the people for the coming of Christ (Gal. 3:23–25). It could not bring spiritual maturity into the lives of the people but only condemnation and defeat.

Elsewhere, Paul likens this stewardship and time period as “the ministration of condemnation” (2 Cor. 3:9) which would last until Christ came and fulfilled the law's requirements and experienced the penalty of the law when dying on the cross (Gal. 3:13, 19; Mark 15:37-38).

Romans 10:4 declares:

“For Christ *is* the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.”

The Law was not given to make people righteous before God but to reveal the sinfulness of man (Rom. 3:19-20; Gal. 3:19; 1 John 3:4). But during Paul's day the legalists created a system of conformity to the Law as the means to salvation (Acts 15:1).

But clearly, we see that there would be a beginning and ending to the Law Dispensation (Rom. 10:4; Gal. 3:19). The Mosaic Law economy is also alluded to in Romans 6:14 which states, "ye are not under the law, but under grace," as it pertains to possessing God's new expression and outworking of grace for victory (union with Christ). This reminds us that the previous law system or stewardship not only officially ended, but by itself, the law had no delivery power over sin.

John Bunyan.

"To run and work the law commands, but gives us neither feet nor hands. But better news the gospel brings, it bids us fly and gives us wings."

### ➤ **DISPENSATION OF GRACE**

Paul used the word "oikonomia" (dispensation) when describing the specific era or time zone of the Church Dispensation which was a "mystery" during the old dispensation of the Law (Ephesians 3:2-6). This dispensation highlights God's grace in the body of believers, the New Testament Church, which He has saved and formed together into a new spiritual organism (1 Cor. 12:13). God has out of His own grace united Jews and Gentiles together into one body – the body of Christ through equally sharing a new union with Christ. We could call this dispensation the Church based upon Paul's statement in Ephesians 3:9-10. In this passage Paul further describes this dispensation as a mystery because the Church (the new people of God which consist of both Jews and Gentiles in Christ) was a sacred secret not revealed in the Old Testament. Since the message was not revealed about the Church, this is a clear indication that the Church did not exist prior to Pentecost (Acts 2).

We could also label it the dispensation of the Spirit since Paul contrasted the coming and outpouring of the Holy Spirit to the stewardship of the law in Galatians 4:6 and 3:14. Pentecost (Acts 2) was the birthday of the Church and the Spirit's permanent indwelling is the key characteristic in this dispensation (John 14:17; Rom. 8:9).

Paul also seems to liken this same grace dispensation to the "dispensation of the Gospel" in I Corinthians 9:17. The grace dispensation was a unique

stewardship whereby Paul presented the Gospel to the Gentiles since God on a large scale was calling out of humanity a Gentile people for His name (Acts 15:14). Gentiles would be saved by God's Gospel of grace and placed into the church which is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27-28). In the simplest and most generic form, we would call the dispensation of grace the particular "dispensation of God" (Colossians 1:25) which was given to Paul. This is because Paul was preaching the Gospel of grace (Christ's death on the cross) to the Gentiles in this unique dispensation of God which highlights His new work of saving and sanctifying grace (Col. 1: 24-26).

### **DISPENSATION OF THE FULLNESS OF TIMES**

Paul uses the word "oikonomia" (dispensation) when speaking about the "dispensation of the fullness of times" in Ephesians 1:10. This evidently has reference to the culmination of the dispensational program or plan of God. It is that future stewardship designated as the millennium or kingdom, which John envisions in Revelation 20:5 and to which I Corinthians 15:25 has reference to. Christ will "put all enemies under his feet." This will be the culminating point of God's dispensational program or plan of the ages.

The fact that this is related to "times" suggest that each dispensation occurred during a period of time and this particular dispensation of the kingdom is the final dispensation to which all the previous ones were moving which would complete God's plan of the ages. The Bible seems to tell us that all of God's "times" or seasons (1 Thess. 5:1) are heading toward the kingdom era of 1,000 years (Revelation 20:5), which will turn into God's eternal kingdom (Revelation 11:15; II Samuel 7:16) or the eternal state as seen in Revelation 21 and 22. For this reason, the "fullness of times" dispensation may be designated as two separate dispensations (millennium and eternal state) or be one dispensation subdivided into two phases (the 1,000 year reign and eternal state). However, since there is a repeated emphasis in Scripture that God works in series of "sevens" (Gen. 2:2; 20:10; Rev. 1:4, 13, 20; 3:1; 4:5; 5:1, 6; 8:2; 10:3; 12:3; 15:6-7; 16:1; 17, 7, 9; 21:9), it is more probable that there are *seven* specific dispensations which bring together both history and prophecy (God's plan of the ages). This is the view of the author.



In keeping with the series of sevens in which God works, the 1,000 years merges into the eternal kingdom or eternal state (1 Cor. 15:24-28) and is seen as God's final age and stewardship in which He rules over the earth (the 7<sup>th</sup> dispensation). Isaiah envisioned a time of peace over the earth where God would judge sinners (Isa. 65:20) which references the millennium but also references the eternal kingdom or state (Isa. 65:17). Of course, the New Testament gives us the time factor of the millennium (Rev. 20:1-7) which Isaiah could not see or know about. The point is this, the thousand years merges into the eternal kingdom (Isa. 9:6) and therefore can be seen as one dispensation for "of his kingdom there shall be no end" (Luke 1:33).

There is another time frame that some dispensational writers consider to also be a unique, stand-alone dispensation. It is the seven years known as the Tribulation Period or the 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel (Revelation 6-19; Daniel 9:24-27). This could be seen as a separate economy whereby God will be working in judgment with the evildoers on earth. It is called the Time of Jacob's Trouble (Jeremiah 30:7) and Day of the Lord (Isaiah 13:9-13; I Thessalonians 5:2). This is an extended period of time which cannot go unnoticed.

For this reason, some suggest the seven-year Tribulation Period must be dealt with as a distinct economy of catastrophic judgment. Others suggest it is the closing period of the grace economy or dispensation. The closing of the present dispensation (the Church Age) is often referred to in Scripture as "the end of the age" (Matt. 13:39-43) which is viewed as the age before the Second Coming of Jesus to earth to rule the world (the tribulation period). It is the Church Age which also falls under the umbrella of the greater pre-Messianic Age.

To state succinctly, the seven-year Tribulation may very well be the judgment aspect that closes out the grace dispensation. Nevertheless, one must understand that the exact number of dispensations is not at the heart of the system of dispensationalism. The main emphasis of dispensationalism is recognizing clearly defined differences between God's dealings with specific people during specific times in history and prophecy. So, when some dispensationalists view the tribulation period and eternal

state as separate dispensations is does not affect the basic tenants of dispensationalism.

We have now discovered that the Scriptures give clear evidence of at least three dispensations (Law, Grace, and Kingdom). Paul clearly defines and delineates them as stewardships or specific ways that God works throughout history and prophecy with different classes of people and different sets of promises (not people remade and promises allegorized). To miss the teaching of God's Word on the dispensations and the distinctions God makes between people, promises, and prophetic events will cause great confusion when studying the Bible.

In classic dispensationalism, there are seven clearly defined dispensations. Again, there may be varied opinions regarding the exact number of dispensations. Some believe in a 3, 7, 8 or 9 dispensational frameworks but these opinions will never affect the main dispensational flow and divisions in the Scriptures and the literal understanding of Israel, the covenants, and Bible prophecy.

#### OTHER PROBABLE DISPENSATIONAL DIVISIONS

##### ➤ **DISPENSATION OF INNOCENCE**

In Romans 5:12-14, Paul also speaks of a time before the law (pre-fall), when sin entered the world. We can arrive at various conclusions because of this Scripture passage. First, there must have been a time when man was not a sinner but created in original righteous and innocence. Hence, we have what we could call a dispensation of innocence as seen in Genesis chapters one and two. This was a stewardship before man sinned. We will study more about this later.

##### ➤ **DISPENSATION OF CONSCIENCE**

Following the Genesis Fall (post-fall), there was evidently a new era and stewardship which man entered. It was a time period and stewardship whereby man would be conscious of his disobedience and sin. Although

this specific age apparently ends, the light of conscience would continue on within the human race (I Timothy 1:5, 4:2; John 8:9, Romans 2:15).

### ➤ **DISPENSATION OF GOVERNMENT**

After the world-wide Genesis flood, God established human government upon this earth (Genesis 8:15-9:7). In the new earth following the global flood, God devised a stewardship whereby man would be governed by man. Man is now responsible to govern the entire world for God which means to uphold the dignity of human life. This stewardship ended in relation to time. However, the government aspect of ruling that was revealed in this dispensation continues to the present day (Romans 13:1-7).

God's revelation increases with each new dispensation. Certain truths do not cease because a stewardship and specific age ends. Various truths taught within the individual stewardships such as the moral law (Romans 2:12-15; 8:4; I Timothy 1:8-10), conscience over sin (Romans 2:14-15; 3:23), Abrahamic Covenant (Galatians 3:17) and human government (Romans 13) are to remain intact throughout each passing dispensation. God may change His way of dealing with men without totally abolishing the main feature of a former dispensation. Certain things which God establishes within a particular economy, He plans to continue to use, even in the future dispensations. In this way, God's revelation continues to increase throughout His plan of the ages. This is called progressive revelation.

### ➤ **DISPENSATION OF PROMISE**

In Galatians 3:17, Paul speaks of a time before the law (Mosaic Covenant) during which the promise (Abrahamic Promise) had been given. Although the word dispensation is not given to this time frame, it would seem proper to conclude that this era was a unique stewardship as well (Dispensation of Promise). God was specifically managing Abraham and his people in a unique way. They were to remain in the land of promised blessing which God called them to. Although this age apparently ends, the Abrahamic Covenant of promised blessing is still intact and will be fulfilled at a future time (Romans 11:26; Galatians 3:17-18).

## ADDED NOTES OF INTEREST

- The need for salvation and forgiveness remains the same because of mankind's fallen, disobedient, sinful condition.
- The way of salvation throughout all the dispensations has always been the same. It has always been by grace, through faith, plus nothing (Hebrews 11:4; Genesis 6:8, 15:6; James 2:23). Before the cross, people looked ahead to Calvary (Gen. 3:15; John 8:56; Gal. 3:8) but following the cross people look back to Calvary (John 19:30; Rev. 5:12).
- One of the unifying points in all of the dispensations is the glory of God (Phil. 4:20; 1 Pet. 5:11).

Ephesians 3:21

“Unto him *be* glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.”

- Each dispensation has a God-ordained responsibility, stewards (people commanded to fulfill God's responsibility), a new ruling factor, a failure on mankind's part, God's judgment, and some evidence of God's grace at work.

At this point, we want to investigate each individual dispensation. It will help us to see the general picture of each dispensation, how God was working, and what happens at the end of each dispensation. This general overview will help us to see God's plan of the ages as He works with different people, at different times, in different ways, and for different reasons. Again, dispensationalism means that God works in unique ways with mankind at different points in history and prophecy.

At this point, let's take each dispensation and study it in more detail.

### 1. Dispensation of Innocence – Genesis 1:27 – 3:19

- **Stewards:** Adam and Eve
- **Period:** From the creation of man to his temptation and fall

- **Ruling Factor:** A favorable dispensation toward God
- **Responsibility:** To obey God (Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15-17)
- **Failure:** Disobedience (Genesis 3:1-6)
- **Judgment:** Death and Curse (Genesis 2:17; 3:7-19)
- **Grace:** A new chance and the promise of a Redeemer (Genesis 3:15)

This dispensation covered the period of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The dispensation of innocence is the shortest of all the dispensations. God created man to live in perfect harmony with Himself. During this specific time period there was nothing known of imperfection or evil. Adam and Eve were created in the image of God which would include a state of pristine holiness and impeccability. They were completely innocent of sin (Genesis 1:27). The original created couple had an eternal soul, a free will, and the ability to procreate. They walked with God in perfect harmony and communion and worked with God as He interacted with His creation (Genesis 2:15).

Adam and Eve were innocent until they disobeyed God, which resulted in sin and death entering the world (Romans 5:12). This death affected their bodies (physical death) and souls (spiritual death – separation from God). But this disobedience also affected the entire human race through the imputation of Adam's sin and judgment upon all of Adam's descendants (Rom. 5:14; 1 Cor. 15:22). At the very moment of Adam and Eve's sin, they lost their innocence. Both were immediately aware of losing this original innocence because they hid themselves from God, sensing shame for sinning against God and trying to cover this shame, which was focused or centered upon their nakedness (Genesis 3:7-8). In other words, the shame of their physical nakedness served as a sign of their spiritual shame before God because of their sinful actions.

In this dispensation God's commands were to (1) replenish the earth with children, (2) subdue the earth, (3) have dominion over the animals, (4) care for the garden, and (5) abstain from eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 1:26-28; 2:8-17). God warned of the punishment of physical and spiritual death for disobedience (Gen. 2:17). This dispensation was short-lived and was brought to an end by Adam and

Eve's disobedience in eating the forbidden fruit and God forcing them from the garden (Gen. 3).

In Genesis 3:14-19, we discover five major aspects of judgment that occurred in this dispensation: 1) a curse on the serpent, 2) a change in womanhood and childbearing, 3) a curse on nature, 4) the imposing of difficult work on mankind to produce food, and 5) the promise of Christ as the seed who will bruise the serpent's head (Satan).

Although God pronounced judgment on the man and his wife (Genesis 3:16-19), He also showed grace and mercy by killing an innocent animal and providing skins to cover or atone for their sin (Gen. 3:21). God's gracious provision demonstrates the inadequacy of man's attempt to atone for his own sin and the sufficiency of God's atonement. The slaughter of the animals introduced the biblical principle "without shedding of blood is no remission" (Hebrews 9:22).

God's ultimate solution to the sin problem was promised in Genesis 3:15. The protoevangelium (first gospel or mention of the good news) was a ray of hope! In His grace, God would send a Redeemer of supernatural birth to save lost mankind. This Savior would be perfectly innocent and pure and be sacrificed for mankind to provide a way of escape from our inherited sin and judgment from Adam. Jesus Christ was "the last Adam" (1 Corinthians 15:45), who offered Himself as the final sacrifice for sin for all who place their faith in Him for salvation (1 Peter 3:18). After the Genesis Fall, God began a new dispensation which focused on a new ruling factor.

## **2. Dispensation of Conscience – Genesis 3:23 – 8:19**

- **Stewards:** Cain and Seth and their families (descendants).
- **Period:** From man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden until the Flood, a period of about 1,656 years.
- **Ruling Factor:** Human conscience
- **Responsibility:** To do good and offer blood sacrifices (Genesis 3:7, 22; 4:4).
- **Failure:** Wickedness on a worldwide basis (Genesis 6:5-6, 11, 12).
- **Judgment:** The worldwide Flood (Genesis 6:7, 13; 7:11-14).
- **Grace:** Noah and his family are saved (Genesis 6:8-9; 7:1; 8:1).

As a result of the sin of Adam and Eve, the original parents developed a consciousness toward their own sinful depravity (Gen. 3:7). This awareness of sin would transition into the next dispensation – the dispensation of conscience. Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden with this new awareness of sin which was then passed on to their immediate family and descendants, not only verbally, but also innately through the propagation of the human race (Rom. 1:19; 2:15). However, we discover from this dispensation that conscience alone cannot provide victory over sin for it can become defiled (Titus 1:15) and insensitive toward sin (1 Tim. 4:2).

During the dispensation of conscience, mankind became increasingly wicked. Guided by conscience, man was supposed to choose to do good and approach God by means of a blood sacrifice (Genesis 4:4). But it was during this time that the first death occurred, when Cain slew his brother Abel out of jealousy (Genesis 4:8), reminding us that conscience alone does not keep man from committing acts of sinful depravity.

God had accepted Abel's animal sacrifice but rejected Cain's grain sacrifice (Gen. 4:3-5). This caused Cain to be filled with envy and he devised a plan to murder his brother. Before the murder, God warned Cain of impending sin and told him that he could still choose to do well (Genesis 4:6-7). In other words, Cain had the opportunity to bring a proper sacrifice, after he saw what pleased God. But Cain let jealousy cloud his eyes and defiled his conscience. Cain demanded that God be pleased with his own efforts and refused to follow God's plan (Gen. 4:5). This same kind of thinking still plagues mankind today, as people attempt to approach God on their own terms rather than on God's terms.

We discover that during this time mankind violated his conscience and failed in his responsibility to choose to do right. Conscience proved to be a very poor guide. Out of all the people that lived during this dispensation, only Abel, Enoch, and Noah were called righteous (Hebrews 11:2-7; Genesis 5:22-24; 6:8-9).

Genesis 6:5 reveals this astonishing stat:

“And GOD saw that the wickedness of man *was* great in the earth, and *that* every imagination of the thoughts of his heart *was* only evil continually.”

The Lord's solution of this universal wickedness, due to mankind's defiled and depraved conscience, was to destroy man from the face of the earth, along with all land-dwelling animals (Gen. 6:7). However, the Bible declares: "But Noah found grace (favor) in the eyes of the LORD" (Gen. 6:8). God extended grace to Noah and his family and gave instructions to build the ark and established His covenant with them (Genesis 6:14-22). God saved eight people and brought them forth into a new dispensation – the dispensation of government (Genesis 7:1; 8:1; Hebrews 11:7).

The apostle Peter uses God's grace which was extended to Noah and his immediate family as an illustration of God's grace today to us who are saved by grace through faith in the death of Christ who passed through the waters of the Father's judgment on our behalf to rescue us (1 Peter 3:19-21). Interestingly, Noah warned his contemporaries (those who lived during his era) for 120 years of the coming judgment as he built the ark. In doing this, God showed His great patience toward sinners (2 Pet. 3:9). God as the righteous Judge must eventually deal with sin and we discover that during Old Testament times judgment was often quickly and severely meted out on evildoers. The judgment that ends the dispensation of conscience is the global flood (Genesis 6:7, 13; 7:11-14)

2 Peter 3:3-6 records the catastrophic judgment of the flood:

"Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as *they were* from the beginning of the creation (*the manmade doctrine of uniformitarianism*). For this they willingly are ignorant of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water (*CREATION shows that things are not always the same for God created earth's land masses, continents, and mountains out of the initial watery ocean that He created – Gen. 1:2, 6*) Whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished" (*CATASTROPHE in the universal Genesis Flood also shows things do not remain the same – God knows how to judge*).

Here is the point of all this. Man failed miserably to live according to God's holy standard during the dispensation or stewardship of conscience. This



dispensation demonstrates what mankind will do if left to his own will and conscience, which has been tainted by the inherited sin nature of Adam (Rom. 5:12). Of course, conscience is something that was passed down through all the human generations. Humanity today is still under the same responsibility as mankind was from the Fall to the Flood, with “their conscience bearing witness” (Romans 2:15). Romans’ chapters 1-2 teach that all man still possess a conscience which innately tells them there is a Creator and Moral Giver to whom they are accountable. But sadly, many suppress this inward truth and live according to their sinful inclinations. With the universal moral failure under the Dispensation of Conscience, God chose to introduce another stewardship that focused on man being guided through the establishment of governmental authority.

### **3. Dispensation of Human Government – Genesis 8:20-11:9**

- **Stewards:** Noah and his descendants.
- **Period:** From the Flood to the confusion of tongues at Babel, about 429 years.
- **Ruling Factor:** Human Government
- **Responsibility:** To scatter and multiply (Genesis 9).
- **Failure:** Refusal to scatter and the building of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-4).
- **Judgment:** Confusion of languages (Genesis 11:5-9).
- **Grace:** Abraham is chosen—the start of the Jewish race (Genesis 12:1-3).

In the next dispensation, God works in a new way with His creation through human government. After the Flood, God no longer would universally judge the earth with another global flood. As a result, God developed a human agency known as civil government that was divinely appointed to restrain evil and protect man from his own sinful nature. Noah and his wife and his three sons and their wives began to repopulate the earth.

Noah and his family had practical knowledge of the failure under the dispensation of conscience, so God made them responsible to protect the sanctity of human life.

Genesis 9:6

“Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man.”

Through a God ordained and established government there could now be orderly rule over mankind which would result in the good of society. Capital punishment is the most potent form and function of human government. It presupposes all other forms of legislation, organization, and governmental enforcement (police force, soldiers, kings, presidents etc.). In the New Testament (Romans 13) man is still responsible to use this authority to enforce righteousness. In other words, God's command in Genesis 9:6 has not been rescinded.

Sin continued to manifest itself in the third dispensation even with the restraining influence of human government. The height of this disobedience was the rebellion against God at Babel. It was here that mankind built an idolatrous tower to rebel against God and His commandment.

Genesis 11:4

“And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower (ziggurat), whose top *may reach* unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”

Staying in one place was the one thing God told them they could not do (Gen. 9:1). Their rebellion against God, refusing to repopulate the earth, was seen in the resurrection of a tower of idolatry. But God would have none of it. To enforce His command, God divided humanity into different language groups so that His sovereign will to populate the entire earth was accomplished. The result of the scattering of the peoples of the earth was the rise of different nations and cultures. From that point on, human governments were established on earth to maintain a sense of righteous order and human dignity. It was at this time that God also established a covenant with Noah that He would never again destroy the earth by water (Gen. 9:13-15).

God made the following promises and commands to Noah and his family during this dispensation:

- ✓ God will not curse the earth again.
- ✓ Noah and family are to replenish the earth with people.
- ✓ They shall have dominion over the animal creation.
- ✓ They are allowed to eat meat. At creation God assigns to Adam and Eve a vegetarian diet (Gen. 1:29). After the flood, God allows mankind to hunt and eat wild game (Gen. 9:2-4).
- ✓ The law of capital punishment is established.
- ✓ There never will be another worldwide flood.
- ✓ The sign of God's promise will be the rainbow.

God's grace continued to be shown to God's chosen people during this era of human history as was illustrated in the life of Noah and his family (Gen. 6:8). However, after man's rebellion against God under the Dispensation of Human Government, God began to move in a new way among mankind. He began a new era of giving a specific promise to a specific nation (Israel) that He chose to live in a Promised Land.

#### **4. Dispensation of Promise – Genesis 11:10-Exodus 18:4**

- **Stewards:** The patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- **Period:** From the call of Abraham to Israel's arrival at Mt. Sinai, a period of about 430 years.
- **Ruling Factor:** God's Promise
- **Responsibility:** Dwell in Canaan (Genesis 12:1-7).
- **Failure:** Dwelt in Egypt (Genesis 12:10; 46:6; Exod. 1:1-7).
- **Judgment:** Egyptian bondage (Exodus 1:8-14).
- **Grace:** Moses the deliverer is sent (Exodus 3:6-10).

The fourth dispensation begins with the call of Abraham, continues through the lives of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), and ends with the Exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt. This covered a period of about 430 years. In this period of time God worked in another unique way with man.

It is called the dispensation of “promise” because of the covenant made with Abraham, who would eventually live in the “land of promise” (Hebrews 6:13; 11:9). Unconditional promises, of both a physical and spiritual nature, were made to Abraham and his descendants Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:4-21; 17:1-8; 22:15-19). During this dispensation God developed a great nation (Israel) that He had chosen as His people (Genesis 12:1–Exodus 19:25). Based on this promise, God later (Genesis 17:5) changed Abram’s name from Abram (“high father”) to Abraham (“father of a multitude”).

The underlying foundation of the dispensation of promise was the Abrahamic Covenant promise. Here are some of the key points of this unconditional covenant as found in Genesis 12:1-3; 15; 17:8-14.

- ✓ From Abraham would come a great nation that God would bless with natural descendants and spiritual prosperity.
- ✓ God would make Abraham’s name great.
- ✓ God would bless those that blessed Abraham’s descendants and curse those that cursed them.
- ✓ In Abraham all the families of the earth will be blessed. This is fulfilled in Jesus Christ and His work of salvation.
- ✓ The sign of the covenant is circumcision.
- ✓ This covenant, which was repeated to Isaac and Jacob, is confined to the Hebrew people and the 12 tribes of Israel.

The Abrahamic Covenant is unconditional for Abraham was asleep when God moved between the pieces or halves of the animals (Gen. 15:12-21). The faithfulness of God would ultimately prevail in bringing this covenant to pass even though Abraham was required to initially obey God to receive God’s promised blessing (Gen. 12:4, 10; 13:1, 5-15; Neh. 9:8).

This covenant should also be taken literally. There is no need to spiritualize or allegorize the promise given to Abraham. God’s promises to Abraham’s descendants (the Jewish people) will be fulfilled literally, geographically, and eternally in relation to the Jewish people. Centuries after Abraham died, the children of Israel took possession of the land under Joshua’s leadership (Joshua 21:43). However, at no point in history has Israel

occupied and controlled all of the land that God had originally promised. For this reason, there remains a final fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant when Israel will possess their God-given homeland to the fullest extent, not only geographically but spiritually, since Israel will occupy the land of promise (Israel) as a regenerate nation of people who seek to live in holiness, righteousness, and obedience to God (Ezekiel 20:40–44 and 36:1—37:28).

In this dispensation, God promised the specific land of Israel to His people (Genesis 12:1; 13:15, 17; 15:7-8; 17:8). Eventually the Hebrew people were faced with a test. Would they believe the promise God gave to Abraham to protect, bless, and guide them through the land, or would they choose to not believe in this promise? They chose not to believe the promise and went down to Egypt and were eventually taken into Egyptian bondage (Genesis 12:10; 46:6; Exod. 1:1-14). The good news is that God eventually provided grace through Moses their deliverer. Grace was also seen through their Passover protection and the miraculous manna provisions and material needs found in the wilderness following their Exodus from Egypt (Exodus 12–18). Once they left Egypt, they were in one sense officially a nation, led by God into the wilderness toward the Promised Land.

In Exodus 19:4 God reminds the Israelites of His grace in bringing them out of Egypt: “Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself.” Sadly, the Dispensation of Promise ended in relation to the original movement of Israel to establish themselves in the land or promise. It ended abruptly at Mt. Sinai, which is where God gave Abraham’s people the Law to govern them in another unique manner (stewardship). Because of the failure of God’s people in choosing to not believe in God’s promise, they took upon themselves the bondage of Mosaic Law, which produced a noticeable separation from God and curses and judgments from the hand of God (Exodus 19:10-13, 18, 21; 12:19). Hence, God dispensational dealing moved from His promise to the new era and revelation of His Law.

The people did not know how good they had it when living under God’s promise for His promise was rooted in His grace. But they exchanged grace for law and entered the next dispensation in God’s plan of the ages.

## 5. Dispensation of Law - Exodus 19:5 to John 19:30.

- **Stewards:** Moses and the children of Israel as a nation at Mt. Sinai.
- **Period:** from Mt. Sinai until Mt. Calvary when Christ Jesus fulfilled the Law with His death.
- **Ruling Factor:** The Mosaic Law
- **Responsibility:** Keep the whole Law for blessing in life (Exodus 19:3-8)
- **Failure:** The Law was broken (Exodus 32:15-28; 2 Kings 17:7-20).
- **Judgment:** The Assyrian and Babylonian captivities of Judah and Israel (II Kings 17 and 25), Israel temporarily removal from the place of blessing (Rom. 11), and eventually worldwide dispersion (Deuteronomy 28:63-66; Luke 21:20-24).
- **Grace:** The promised Savior is sent (Isaiah 9:6-7; Galatians 4:4-5).

The fifth dispensation is called the Dispensation of Law. It lasted almost 1,500 years. It began with the acceptance of the law by Israel in the wilderness (Ex. 19:8) and ended after Jesus Christ's death on the cross (Matt. 27:51). The dispensation of Law is officially over (Rom. 6:14-15; 10:4; Gal. 3:19). However, during the time of the dispensation of law, God dealt specifically with the Jewish nation through the Mosaic Covenant, or the law, found in Exodus 19–23. Eventually, due to the people's disobedience to the covenant, the tribes of Israel lost possession of the Promised Land and were taken into captivity and bondage from other nations (Assyria and Babylon).

The Dispensation of Law is named after the Mosaic Law, which is called a "covenant" in Exodus 24:7-8, Deuteronomy 4:13, and Galatians 3:19. It was God's only conditional covenant with Israel in that blessing and success depended solely upon the people's obedience to the Law (Exodus 19:5). It did not take long for the Law to be broken, as proved by the idolatrous golden calf in Exodus (Exodus 32:15-28). Israel could never to be saved by keeping the Law since it was given to show the sinfulness of man and his ultimate condemnation without grace (Romans 3:20).

The Law was a temporary covenant to be made null and void by the institution of the New Covenant which was officially inaugurated with

Christ's death (Luke 22:20; Hebrews 8:13; 10:9). The Law was added until Christ (the seed) came and fulfilled the Law with His life and death upon the cross.

Galatians 3:19 declares:

“Wherefore then *serveth* the law? (what is the purpose of the law) It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; *and it was* ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator.”

This means the Law Dispensation would also have an abrupt ending with the death of Christ on the cross. “The Law was not God’s final revelation; it was but the preparation for that final revelation in Christ” (Wiersbe). It is important to note that the Law of Moses was given only for and to the nation of Israel (Exodus 19:3-8; Deuteronomy 5:1-3; 4:8). Jesus made it clear that it was given to Israel and not the Gentiles (Mark 12:29-30). As mentioned earlier, the Law, was the “guardian” that disciplined the nation of Israel and prepared the people for the coming of Christ (Gal. 3:23–25). The apostle Paul said the Law was given to Israel and not the Church (Romans 2:14; 9:4-5; Ephesians 2:11-12).

When God presents the Law to Israel, He limits the kinds of wild game that He permits His people to consume (Lev. 11; Deut. 14). In the New Testament, however, God withdraws the Mosaic dietary restrictions (Acts 10:9-15) and other ceremonial aspects (Col. 2:16). This is another indication we are no longer living under the Law from a dispensational perspective.

The Law was meant to govern the earthly lives of Israel, to define sin, demonstrate that man was a sinner, and to point to the coming Savior. This means the Law did not change or repeal the salvation provisions of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:3). It’s unfortunate that Israel misinterpreted the purpose of the Law and sought a righteousness by good deeds and ceremonial ordinances rather than by God’s grace (Gen. 19:8; Romans 9:31—10:3; Acts 15:1). Because they were focused on attaining their own righteousness, they rejected their Messiah when He entered the world (John 1:11).

Israel's misinterpretation of the original intent of the Law was carried over into the New Testament in the form of legalism (attaining salvation through law-keeping – Acts 15:1) which is repeatedly refuted in New Testament theology (Rom. 3:27; Gal. 3:10-11). Israel's history from Mt. Sinai to the destruction of the temple in AD 70 was one long record of violating God's law. Ultimately Israel was judged with worldwide dispersion because of the breaking of the law of Moses and their rejection of the Messiah (Deuteronomy 28:63-66; Luke 21:20-24; James 1:1). However, because of Jesus' perfect fulfillment of the law through His life and death, bearing the judgment or curse of the Law on our behalf (Gal. 3:13; Col. 2:14), we have from a New Testament perspective been discharged from the Law dispensationally, soteriologically, ceremonially, and even morally as a system we must observe to obtain sanctification and salvation (Rom. 6:14-15; 8:1-4). From a salvation perspective we can sing:

“Free from the law—oh, happy condition!  
Jesus hath bled, and there is remission;  
Cursed by the law and bruised by the fall,  
Christ hath redeemed us once for all.”

The next dispensation in God's time zone follows the era of the Mosaic Law and man's repeated failures to keep the law to obtain righteousness and sanctification (Rom. 10:1-3). God now moves into a new stewardship where grace is the focus and Law is no longer the central point of God's dealings with mankind. God would begin to move by expressing a new feature of grace that was never seen or experienced within humanity.

## **6. Dispensation of Grace (John 19:31 to Revelation 3:22)**

- **Stewards:** The Church which consists of all New Testament believers – both Jew and Gentile (Ephesians 5:23; Galatians 3:27; 1 Corinthians 12:13).
- **Period:** From the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) to the Rapture (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18), a period of nearly 2,000 years and counting!
- **Ruling Factor:** Grace functioning in a new way that was not seen in the Mosaic system. In contrast to the Law, it is the New Covenant grace features that pertains to the internalizing of God's moral Law



and absolutes, His holy disposition placed within the heart (the new nature) and the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit for spiritual power (Jer. 31:31-34; 2 Cor. 3:3, 7; Rom. 7:22; 2 Pet. 1:4; Acts 1:8; John 14:17).

- **Responsibility:** To place faith in the grace of God for salvation through the finished sacrifice of Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9) and experience sanctification in the Christian life through the new feature or expression of grace, which pertains to a union with Christ that is experienced through the new nature and the Spirit's presence and power (Romans 6:1-15; 8:1-4; Gal. 5:18; 2 Peter 3:18).
- **Failure:** Man decides to follow law (works) instead of the grace way for salvation and sanctification, a lack of maturity, increase of worldliness within churches, and the Church (Christendom) falling into total apostasy (Galatians 5:4; 2 Timothy 3:1-5; 2 Thess. 2:7).
- **Judgment:** The Tribulation Period of seven years that results in judgment upon unsaved mankind on a worldwide basis, which includes judgment upon the unbelieving/apostate church that has apostatized from the truth (Revelation 3:10; 17:16).
- **Grace:** Forgiveness of sins through the finished sacrifice of Jesus Christ (1 John 1:17; John 19:30; Rev. 12:11; Rev. 13:8).

The sixth dispensation, the one in which we now live, is the Dispensation of Grace. It began with the New Covenant and Christ's shed blood (Luke 22:20). This "Age of Grace" or "Church Age" occurs between the 69th and 70th week of Daniel (Dan. 9:24). It starts with the coming of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost ("the beginning" of the Church - Acts 15:14) and ends with the Rapture of the Church (1 Thessalonians 4). This dispensation is worldwide and includes both Jews and the Gentiles.

This Dispensation of Grace is often referred to as the Church Age because it is during this era that Jesus is building His Church (Matthew 16:18). During this unique period of time people are saved by the finished and final sacrifice of Christ (John 1:17; 1 Pet. 1:10) and each believer is responsible to live a holy life by God's new work of sanctifying grace which is magnified above law (Rom. 6:1-4).

This means that man's responsibility during the Dispensation of Grace is to believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God (John 3:16-18), and then be sanctified through union with Christ (Roman 6:1-15). In this dispensation the Holy Spirit baptizes believers into the body of Christ which is the Church (1 Cor. 12:13) and indwells believers as the Comforter (John 14:16-26). The unique ministry of the Holy Spirit who permanently indwells (John 14:16), empowers (Acts 1:8), and fills (Eph. 5:18) New Testament believers has led some dispensationalists to secondarily term the grace dispensation as the Dispensation of the Spirit which is the hallmark of the new dispensational order (Acts 1:5). With the Holy Spirit indwelling His Church, we are able to walk with the Lord and live as He intends us to live (Philippians 2:13; Ephesians 2:10; 5:17-18; Philippians 1:6; 4:13; Romans 8:14).

The *grace* dispensation is the *great* dispensation with the new internalizing of the Holy Spirit's ministry. The Spirit's work in our hearts today is a new feature of the working of God's grace which signifies we are no longer living under the Law dispensation. Galatians 5:18 says, "But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law."

Grace is God's benevolence to the undeserving. Grace is the rule of life for the Church (John 6:14-15), and through the Church God's grace is extended to the whole world, as the Gospel of Jesus Christ is taken to the ends of the earth (Mark 16:15). It has been said that grace *saves* us (Ephesians 2:8-9), it *supports* us (Romans 5:2), it *teaches* us (Titus 2:11-12), and it *disciplines* us (1 Corinthians 11:28-32; Hebrews 12:5-11) within the grace dispensation. The Church (God's New Testament saints) have not attained perfection (Phil. 3:12), but as the Church is being sanctified through grace, each member is becoming more like Christ (2 Pet. 3:18).

This dispensation has lasted for almost 2,000 years and it will end in conjunction with the Second Coming of Christ to planet earth to establish the next dispensation of the Millennium (Rev. 19-20). We do know that at the Rapture all born-again believers (Church age saints) will be transported back to Heaven with Christ (John 14:1-3; 1 Thess. 4:13-18) which results in the judgment of the seven-year tribulation period upon the earthly evildoers and unbelieving, apostate church (1 Thess. 1:10; 5:1-10; Rev. 3:10). Afterward, Christ will return to earth to begin His Kingdom reign

which begins the final dispensational arrangement. The Second Coming will result in the dawning of a new age and administration (stewardship) or dispensation that will bring God's plan of the ages to its climax and end.

## 7. Dispensation of Millennial and Eternal Kingdom (Revelation 20:1-10)

- **Stewards:** The resurrected Tribulational and Old Testament saints, the glorified Church, survivors of the Tribulation and their descendants who are born during the Millennium.
- **Period:** From the Second Coming of Jesus Christ until the final rebellion, a period of one thousand years, till Christ returns the earth to a theocracy (1 Cor. 15:23-34) and the earth merges into the eternal state (Isa. 9:6).
- **Ruling Factor:** Rule of Christ
- **Responsibility:** To be obedient, remain undefiled, and worship the King for 1,000 years (Isaiah 11:3-5; Zechariah 14:9; Matt. 5-7).
- **Failure:** After Satan is loosed from the Abyss, sinful man rebels one more time (Revelation 20:7-9).
- **Judgment:** Destruction of the world and universe (II Peter 3:10-11) which merges into the eternal kingdom (Luke 1:33).
- **Grace:** Jesus Christ restores creation and rules righteously in Israel, with all saints assisting Him (Isaiah 11:1-5; Matthew 25:31-46; Revelation 2:26-27; 20).

The Millennium which merges into the eternal kingdom is the seventh and final dispensation. Both phases of this dispensation (the mediatorial and eternal kingdom) focus on the reign of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the final dispensation is two phases of Christ's reign which consist of His reign which returns the earth to a theocracy (1,000 years or the Millennium) and His eternal reign (1 Cor. 15:23-34). One seamlessly merges into the other.

Ephesians 1:10 speaks of this coming earthly kingdom:

"That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; *even* in him."

The dispensation in view is the millennial reign of Christ on earth during which everything will be under His rule (1 Cor. 15:27; Col. 1:20). Even though in some sense everything is under Christ's universal rule or sovereign authority now (Ps. 103:19), Jesus Christ will be the Head of all things in a more direct way during the Messianic Kingdom. Everyone and everything will acknowledge and respond to His authority in Christ's future reign over the earth (Isa. 2:2-4; 11:1-10).

The Millennium is referred to the "dispensation of the fulness of times" which means it is the culmination and finale of all the previous ages on earth. In other words, everything that previously occurred in God's dispensation program was moving toward this universal role of Messiah's rule. The Millennium which merges into the eternal kingdom is the ultimate goal of God's plan of the ages. It's God's completion of His times and dispensations to which everything was moving. God's plan of the ages will be fulfilled or completed when all things both spiritual and material will be under Christ's direct rule and authority (1 Cor. 15:27; Col. 1:20).

The mediatorial kingdom lasts 1,000 years (Revelation 20:1-10) and refers to the time Christ's takes back the earth from Satan and creates a theocracy. But the mediatorial kingdom merges into the eternal kingdom and state as seen in the eternal nature of Christ's rule over the earth (Luke 1:33; 1 Cor. 15:24-28). Therefore, the final dispensation is not merely 1,000 years but is the bridge that leads into the eternal state.

The Millennial will be a time characterized by peace (Isaiah 11:6-7; Micah 4:3), justice (Isaiah 11:3-4), unity (Isaiah 11:10), abundance (Isaiah 35:1-2), reversal of the curse (Isa. 11:6-9; 65:25), healing from diseases and deformities (Isaiah 29:18; 33:24; 35:5-6), righteousness (Isaiah 35:8), joy (Isaiah 55:12), peace (Isa. 2:4; Micah 4:3), and the physical presence of Christ on earth (Isaiah 16:5). Satan will be bound in the Abyss during this specific period of time (Revelation 20:1-3). Jesus as the Messiah will be ruling over the whole world with a rod of iron (Isaiah 9:6-7; 11; Rev. 19:15). The resurrected saints of all the ages will participate in the management of the government during the 1,000 years (Revelation 2:26-27; 20:4-6).

On Jesus' first visit to the earth, He brought grace; at His Second Coming He will execute justice and usher in the Millennium. Jesus was referring to the Millennial Kingdom when He taught His disciples to pray, "Thy kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10). This earthly kingdom will result in a futuristic and final fulfillment of the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New covenants which were given to the Jewish nation (Gen. 13:15; 2 Sam. 7:16; Ezek. 11:17-20; 36:25-28). Christ will return as Israel's King and rule over them in the land of Israel while sitting on the throne of David in the city of Jerusalem (Acts 1:6; Matt. 19:28; Luke 1:32-33; Ps. 48:2).

The only people allowed to enter the earthly kingdom at its inception are believers from the age of grace, righteous survivors of the seven years of tribulation, and the resurrected tribulational and Old Testament saints (Rev. 5:10; Matt. 13:41-43; 25:1-10, 31-46; Rev. 20:4; Dan. 12:3). No unsaved person is allowed access into this kingdom at its inception, but untold millions will be born during the thousand years that need to express personal faith in Christ. Again, Satan is bound during the thousand years (Rev. 20:1-3).

A rebellion occurs at the end of the Millennium which demonstrates the incredible wickedness of people. Mankind will have been living in a perfect environment with every need cared for, overseen by a truly just government and God (Isaiah 11:1-5), yet great masses of unsaved people born during the Millennium will want to rebel against God at the end of the earthly Kingdom. They will follow Satan who is released from his millennial prison (Rev. 20:7-9). At the end of this earthly theocracy (the 1,000 years), the final rebellion will be crushed, and Satan will be cast into the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:10). Then comes the Great White Throne Judgment which is the time when the unrighteous of all the dispensations will be judged according to their works and cast into the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:11-15).

After the final judgment, God and His people live forever in the New Jerusalem on a new earth with a new heaven (Revelation 21-22). In other words, the Millennial Kingdom (the 1,000 years), which man define as the mediatorial kingdom, ends with judgment but then merges into the eternal kingdom or eternal state. At this point, God's plan of redemption will have

been completely and fully realized and the redeemed of all the dispensations and ages will know God and enjoy Him forever.

In conclusion, the actual order of God's dispensational program would be as follows: Dispensation of Innocence, Conscience, Human Government, Promise, Law, Grace, and Kingdom (millennial and eternal kingdom).

It should be noted that those who follow the interpretive system of Covenant Theology believe in the basic dispensational overlay of the Bible for they do not bring animals to Church to sacrifice. They see a difference between law and grace. The problem is that they do not espouse literalism when it comes to God's future covenant promises and reject the prophetic or future fulfillment of the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New covenants that relate to Israel's End Time destiny. But consistent dispensationalists do not transcend or transform the meaning of Israel, replace Israel with the Church, or explain away the meaning of Israel's covenant and prophetic promises and reign through allegorizing.

All other prophetic Scriptures have been fulfilled according the historic, grammatical, and literal method of interpretation which means there is no reason to change the meaning of the prophecies related to ethnic Israel (Rom. 11:26). These covenant promises and prophecies will also be literally fulfilled in the future.

Isaiah 9:6-7 is one example:

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given (*literally fulfilled at Christ's birth*): and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of *his* government and peace *there shall be* no end, upon the throne of David (*literally fulfilled when Christ reigns on David's throne during the Millennium – Luke 1:32*), and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever (*literally fulfilled in the eternal state*). The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this."

We have studied about God's plan of the ages. It's exciting to know and be part of His plan for today. As we study our Bibles, we can see God is always

at work as the sovereign, divine administrator that is bringing to pass His perfect plan throughout the ages with different people, in different ways, at different times, and for different purposes. Psalm 115:3 says, “But our God *is* in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased.”