

THE DISPENSATIONS OF SCRIPTURE

I. The Proposition: A study of the Scriptures clearly indicates that God's dealings with man from Genesis through the Revelation are divided into dispensations.

II. The Definition of a Dispensation:

A dispensation is an arrangement, or plan, which God establishes with man.

Each dispensation develops out of the preceding one; that is, they are progressive.

The ultimate objective in the dispensations, or arrangements, which God establishes is the fulfillment of the purpose which God had in Man's creation, i.e., that man should share God's glory.

Under each dispensation certain truths are committed to man. Man is then charged with the oversight or administration of those truths which God has committed to him. This means that man becomes a steward of these truths. (A steward is one who manages or administrates as an agent the affairs and property of someone else.)

As a steward, man is responsible to God for the preservation of these truths Primarily in two ways:

- (1) By personal obedience to the truths.
- (2) By personal faithfulness in the propagation of the truths.

A new dispensation, or arrangement, is established by God when one or both of the following conditions exist:

- (1) When man's failure brings divine judgment and, of necessity, a new arrangement must be set up.
- (2) When, according to God's timing, He is ready for the next step in the progressive unfolding of His purpose with regard to man.

We may determine the number of dispensations in Scripture by discovering each new major arrangement which is instituted by God with man throughout all of the Bible. It is important to note that, while a new dispensation may be introduced because of man's failure, yet basically each dispensation is instituted sovereignly by God in accordance with His original purpose for man.

According to the above statements which make up this definition, the time element in a dispensation is only of incidental importance. In fact, it is quite common to discover an overlapping of time between dispensations.

III. Salvation in the Dispensations.

Special Notation: The fact that there are different dispensations does not mean that there are different ways of salvation. Salvation from Genesis to Revelation is by faith in Jesus Christ. It is revealed in a progressive manner throughout the Bible, the final revelation being given in the New Testament Epistles. God's people before the Cross looked forward to a Redeemer who would come; since the death and resurrection of Christ, we look back to the finished work of Christ for our salvation. BUT SALVATION IS ALWAYS AND ONLY THROUGH CHRIST. This point cannot be emphasized too strongly in studying the dispensations.

IV. The Dispensations Listed.

- A. Innocence: From the creation of man to man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden.
- B. Conscience: From the expulsion from the Garden of Eden to the Flood.

- C. Human Government: From the Flood to the Tower of Babel.
- D. Israel - Part I: From Abraham to Christ. This included two separate dispensations:
 - 1. Promise: From Abraham to Moses.
 - 2. Law: From Moses to Christ
- E. Church: From Acts 2 to the Rapture as predicted in 1 Thess. 4:13-18.
- F. Israel - Part II: From the beginning of the Great Tribulation to the end of the Millennium. This also (as Part I) includes two dispensations:
 - 1. The Great Tribulation.
 - 2. The Millennium.
- G. The Eternal State: Divided into The New Heaven and The New Earth. This is identified in Eph. 1:10 as "the dispensation of the fulness of times".

V. The Dispensations Explained.

A. The Dispensation of Innocence.

- 1. Duration: From creation to man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden.
- 2. Scripture: Genesis 1-3.
- 3. Man's state at the beginning: Gen. 1:26-28; 2:7. Man was innocent. that is, free from moral wrong. However, he was not righteous.
- 4. Man's arrangement with God: Gen. 2:15-25, especially vv. 15-17. These are the conditions which are characteristic of the first dispensation, or arrangement, which God makes with man.
- 5. Man's failure: Gen. 3:1-6. Cf. 1 Tim. 2:13, 14.
- 6. The consequences of man's failure:

a. Death (cf. Gen. 2:17b).

The basic idea in death is separation, not a cessation of existence. So we have a threefold sense in which man experienced death, and these apply not just to Adam and Eve, but to the whole human family. Cf. Rom. 5:12. (Later on God will prove this conclusively by the Law. Cf. Rom. 3:19-23.)

- 1) Spiritual death - separation from God (Gen. 3:7-10).
- 2) Physical death - separation of the soul from the body (Gen. 3:19).
- 3) Eternal death - separation from the tree of life (Gen. 3:22-24).

b. Innocence was gone; man was now a sinner by nature.

B. The Dispensation of Conscience.

1. Duration: From man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden to the Flood.
2. Scripture: Genesis 4-8. (It is important to keep in mind that the change from one dispensation to another is not sudden, abrupt, and sharply defined, but generally there is an overlapping of time, sometimes even a gradual transition from one arrangement to another.)
3. Man's condition at the beginning: In contrast with the preceding dispensation man is now a sinner by nature, under the penalty of death. One might even say that the purpose of this second dispensation is to determine if man is also a sinner by choice.
4. God's arrangement with man: Now that man had become a sinner, he knew the difference between good and evil, or right and wrong. Cf. Gen. 2: 16, 17.

The problem he faced was that of whether or not, his conscience, recognizing the difference between good and evil, would cause him to choose the good. Or, would he, choosing evil, become completely mastered by sin (Gen. 4:7b).

He was responsible to do "well" (Gen. 4:7a), i.e., to please God (Heb. 11:5). This included the offering of divinely prescribed sacrifices (Gen. 4:3-5a), and these had to be offered "by faith" (Heb. 11:4).

5. Man's failure: Gen. 6:5, 6. Here we have a statement indicating the complete depravity of man--that he was a sinner by nature and by choice.
6. God's judgment: The Flood (Gen. 6:7; 7:17-24).

C. The Dispensation of Human Government.

1. Duration: From the Flood to the Tower of Babel and the confusion of tongues.
2. Scripture: Genesis 9-11.
3. Man's state at the beginning: Only eight people were alive on the earth. Spiritually man was exactly the same as before the Flood. Cf. Gen. 8:21.
4. Man's arrangement with God: Genesis 9.
 - a. The original responsibility of man with regard to the earth is restated with the addition of Gen. 9:5, 6.
 - b. God promised that He would never again destroy the earth with a flood (Gen. 9:8-17).
 - c. The origin of the nations is found in this dispensation, divided as descendants of Noah's sons (Gen. 9:25-27; 10; 11).
5. Man's rebellion against God in Shinar (Gen. 11:1-4; cf. 10:6-10) God's arrangement had called for the replenishing of the earth (Gen. 9: 1), but the purpose in building the tower in Shinar (which was later named the tower of Babel) was "lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (Gen. 11:4b).
6. God's judgment: the confusion of tongues--Babel (Gen. 11:5-9).

D. The Dispensation of Israel--Part I.

This title is different from that found in the Scofield Bible and other writings on the dispensations, but the divisions under this heading do preserve the next two titles which are usually used, i.e., the Dispensation of Promise, and the Dispensation of Law.

The idea which led to this change arose from the fact that in the New Scofield Reference Bible the present dispensation in which we are now living, commonly known as The Dispensation of Grace, is re-named, The Dispensation of the Church (cf. New Scofield Reference Bible, pp. 3, 1162). This was done, apparently, to concentrate attention on the unique feature of the present dispensation, the Church, and to avoid the misconception that the manifestations of the grace of God are limited only to this present time.

The major emphasis of dispensational teaching is the contrast between Israel and the Church. It is not Scripturally correct to speak of the Church in the Old Testament, referring to Israel. Neither is there any Biblical authority for calling the Church, spiritual Israel. Israel is always Israel--not the Church! And, in like manner, the Church is always the Church--never Israel! Failure to recognize these two major distinctions in Bible study leads to hopeless confusion.

Therefore, we suggest the idea: If we are to have a Dispensation of the Church, is it not consistent for us to speak also of the Dispensation of Israel? We believe that it is.

How extensive would the Dispensation of Israel have to be?

Israel began with Abraham. Therefore, it would have to include the Dispensation of Promise. Israel continues into the Dispensation of Law. At the close of the present Dispensation of the Church, God will again turn to deal with Israel through the periods known as the Great Tribulation and the Millennium, or Kingdom.

Consequently, the Dispensation of Israel is different from the preceding dispensations we have considered thus far in that it is actually four dispensations in one. Since, however, they all have to do with Israel, it seems only right to group them under the one heading: the Dispensation of Israel. Because the Dispensation of the Church comes between the second and third of the dispensations to be included under Israel, we have divided the Dispensation of Israel into Parts I and II. Part I includes the Dispensations of Promise and Law; Part II includes the Dispensations of the Great Tribulation and the Millennium.

One further word: The Great Tribulation is not usually considered as a separate dispensation. But, using the definition that a dispensation is an arrangement established by God with man, the Great Tribulation certainly is qualified to be a dispensation by itself. It is entirely different from the Dispensation of the Church, which precedes it, and different also from the Dispensation of the Millennium, which follows it.

1. The Dispensation of Promise.

- a. Duration: From the call of Abraham to the giving of the Law to Moses.
- b. Scripture: Genesis 12-Exodus 40.

- c. Man's state at the beginning: The people of the earth are now divided into nations and speak different languages.
- d. Man's arrangement with God: In the first three dispensations we see the tragic effects of sin on the human family. At this point God's purpose in man's redemption becomes more specific as He sovereignly chooses one man, a descendant of Shem: Abram.

To Abram (later called, Abraham - cf. Gen. 17:5) are given certain promises. Cf. Gen. 12:1-3. This is why we call this the Dispensation of Promise. (On the far-reaching significance of these promises, cf. Gal. 3:8, 9. Cf. also the foundational verse for salvation in the Bible: Gen. 15:6.)

Throughout this dispensation God deals with His chosen people as a family, i.e., the family of Abraham; then, of Isaac; next, of Jacob; and finally, of Joseph.

- e. The transition to the next dispensation: There seems to be no reason for saying that this dispensation ended in special failure. To Abraham had been given the prophecy of the sojourn of his descendants in Egypt (Gen. 15:13-16). As the book of Exodus begins, God's time for the Israelites to return to their own land had come. Therefore, He delivered them from Egypt, and their new circumstances as a nation (Ex. 19:6; cf. Gen. 46:3) necessitated a new arrangement, or dispensation, from God.

2. The Dispensation of Law.

- a. Duration: From the giving of the Law to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2) following the death and resurrection of Christ.
- b. Scripture: From Exodus 20 to Acts 2.
- c. Israel's state at the beginning: Israel had just been delivered from Egyptian bondage, and God was leading them back to the land He had given to Abraham.

It is important to note that, whereas in the Dispensation of Promise, God was dealing with His people as a family, in the Dispensation of Law, He deals with them as a nation.

- d. Israel's arrangement with God: God placed His people, Israel, under the Law as given to Moses. This Law was to serve a twofold purpose:

1) It was to serve as the rule of life for the Israelites in their personal and national affairs. Cf. Gal. 3:19-20.

2) It was to prove to Israel first, then to all men, that man is guilty of sin in God's sight and deserving of judgment. Cf. Rom. 3:19, 20; 7:7-13.

- 3. Israel's failure: "The history of Israel in the wilderness and in the Land is one long record of flagrant, persistent violation of the Law . . ." (Scofield, C. I., Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth, p. 14).

The climactic point of Israel's failure was reached in the rejection

of Jesus Christ as her Messiah, most tragically pictured in Christ's death on the Cross.

f. God's judgment upon Israel: It is twofold:

- 1) Dispersion among the nations of the earth. Cf. Deut. 4:25-28; 28:15-68, esp. vv. 64-68. This dispersion actually began with the Assyrian Captivity of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, in 722 B. C., and was followed by the Babylonian Captivity of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, in 586 B. C. To this day the entire nation has never fully recovered from these original dispersions.
- 2) God TEMPORARILY has set aside Israel as a nation, the fulfillment of His purpose for her being delayed until after the Church is completed and removed from the earth at the Rapture. Cf. Rom. 11.

E. The Dispensation of the Church.

1. Duration: From the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 to the Rapture of the Church. This latter event is still future. Therefore, we are now living in the Dispensation of the Church.
2. Scripture: Acts 2 and 1 Thess. 4:13-18 are the Scripture passages which give, respectively, the beginning and the end of this dispensation.
3. Man's state at the beginning: The distinctive place which Israel has held is not in effect during this dispensation, but Jews and Gentiles are brought into a newly-revealed purpose of God on an equal basis. Cf. Rom. 1:16; 3:21-23; 10:12; Acts 15:6-11.
4. Man's arrangement with God: God has two objectives during this present dispensation:

- 1) Every believer in Christ in this dispensation, and only in this dispensation, is baptized by the Holy Spirit into the Church, the body of Christ. Cf. 1 Cor. 12:13; Matt. 3:11; Acts 1:5; Eph. 3:1-12. Thus, every true Christian is a member of the Church, in this sense, regardless of what his affiliation with a local church might be. Christ is the head of the Church, and those who are saved are members of His body. Cf. 1 Cor. 12:12-17.

While the Church is being completed numerically (and only God knows when this will finally be), in the Lord's ministry to His Church He has made provision for the spiritual maturing of every believer as individuals and as to the place each has in the body of Christ. Cf. 1 Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 4:11-16.

- 2) The evangelization of the world. Cf. Acts 1:8. The Bible does not teach that the whole world will become Christian, but that those who are saved are commissioned to evangelize the world, i.e., to "preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15).
5. The end of this Dispensation: This is described in such passages as 1 Thess. 4:13-18; 1 Cor. 15:51-57; John 14:1-3; Phil. 3:20, 21; 1 John 3:1, 2.

F. The Dispensation of Israel--Part II. (See notes on page 4 regarding The Dispensation of Israel.)

At this point God turns to deal with Israel again. Both the Great Tribulation and the Millennium (or Kingdom) are in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Together they constitute the Day of the Lord.

1. The Dispensation of the Great Tribulation.

- a. Duration: From the Rapture of the Church to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ to the earth. The actual time taken by the Tribulation is seven years. Cf. Dan. 9:24-27. "This seven-year period is divided, in the prophetic writings, into two equal halves of three and one-half years each. The length of the periods is also referred to as 'a time, and times, and half a time' (Rev. 12:14; cp. Dan. 7:25; 12:7); 'forty and two months' (Rev. 11:2; 13:5); and 1260 days (Rev. 11:3; 12:6)" (New Scofield Reference Bible, p. 1362).

- b. Scripture: Matt. 24:1-28; Rev. 6-18; Jer. 30:4-7; Dan. 12:1; 2 Thess. 2:1-12; and others.

Note: In the Scriptures listed here, various names are used for this Dispensation, such as, "the time of Jacob's trouble", "the abomination of desolation", "the day of the Lord", in addition to the "great tribulation". A footnote in the New Scofield Reference Bible (p. 1359) indicates that "it is customary to use 'tribulation' of the whole period, and 'great tribulation' of the second half of the period."

- c. Man's state at the beginning: Since every true believer in Christ will have been raptured with the Church before the beginning of the Tribulation period, this means that everyone living on the earth at the beginning of this dispensation will be unsaved.
- d. Man's arrangement with God: The purpose of the Tribulation is twofold:
 - (1) To judge the earth for its wickedness and rebellion against God.
 - (2) To bring Israel to the place of receiving the Lord Jesus Christ as her Messiah.

Consequently, it will be a time of unparalleled suffering and judgment upon the earth, especially for Israel, as the Scriptures above indicate.

Note: The second point in the paragraph above gives strong evidence that the rapture of the Church will be pre-Tribulation since the object of the Tribulation has nothing to do with the Church.

There will be Jews and Gentiles saved during this time. Some will seal their faith with their blood--in a martyr's death; others will be miraculously spared through the Great Tribulation. Cf. Rev. 7:1-8 (Jews), 9, 14 (Jews and Gentiles).

- e. The end of this dispensation: Cf. Matt. 24:21, 22; Zech. 12:9-13:1.

When God brings the days of the Great Tribulation to an end, He will pour out His Spirit on those who believe in Israel, and then Christ will return to the earth as Israel's Messiah, and as King over all the earth. (In addition to the Zechariah passage cited above, cf. Joel 2:28, 29.)

The resurrection of God's people from Old Testament times, as well as from the Tribulation, will take place at this time (Isa. 25:8-12), and also this will be the time for the judgment of the Gentile nations (Matt. 25:31-46).

2. The Dispensation of the Millennium, or Kingdom.

- a. Duration: From the Second Coming of Christ to just before the setting up of the Eternal State with its new heaven and new earth. This Dispensation will last 1,000 years.
- b. Scripture: Rev. 20:1-6; Psa. 72; Isa. 11, 12; Jer. 23:5-8; Micah 4:1-4; and others.
- c. Man's state at the beginning: All who enter the millennial reign of Christ on earth will be saved. Cf. Matt. 25:31-34.
- d. Man's arrangement with God: This is not the perfect state of the new heaven and the new earth, but a period of enforced righteousness. Christ will rule with a "rod of iron". Cf. Rev. 2:27; 12:5; 19:15. It will be a time of universal peace on the earth.

Since Satan will be able to gather the nations of the earth to battle against God at the close of the millennium, it is evident that children will be born during the millennium--many of whom will not receive Christ as Saviour.

The purpose of the millennium seems to be that of showing how deeply rooted sin is in the human heart. Even though the millennium begins with none but believers on the earth, and under the sovereign reign of Christ, yet Satan finds a sympathetic response among men when the rule of the rod of iron is removed.

- e. The end of this dispensation: The dispensation ends, not with any particular failure on man's part, but because God's time for the millennium has expired. Cf. Rev. 20:7a.

SPECIAL NOTE: Between the Millennium and the setting up of the new heaven and the new earth, there is a brief period of anarchy. Cf. Rev. 20:7-15. It might be called a dispensation of final judgments since it is during this time that Satan is finally judged, and the wicked are judged before the Great White Throne. Its duration is unknown, but it appears to be a very short time.

- G. The Dispensation of the New Heaven and the New Earth. This is called in Eph. 1:10, "the dispensation of the fulness of times". It is the Eternal State, and has reference only to the people of God.

1. Duration: For all eternity.

2. Scripture: Rev. 21, 22; 2 Pet. 3:12, 13; Isa. 65:17; 66:22.
3. Man's state at the beginning--and throughout eternity: All of the people of God of all ages will then be in a state of absolute perfection.

Many temporal conditions and relationships will no longer exist. Cf. Rev. 21:4; 22:3, 5; Matt. 22:29, 30; Mark 12:25; Luke 20:34-36. There will be no births, no deaths. All will be eternal joy and blessing.

4. Man's arrangement with God: The redeemed from all dispensations will in their perfected state inhabit the new heaven and the new earth. The new heaven will be inhabited by the citizens of heaven, the Church. Cf. Phil. 3:20, 21 (ASV). The new earth will be inhabited by all of the redeemed who are not included in the Church, i.e., Old Testament believers as well as the saved of the Tribulation and Millennial Dispensations.

The Bible does not answer all of our questions regarding eternity, but we do know that there will be service of some kind according to Rev. 22:3. Such passages as 1 Cor. 13:12 would seem to indicate that all of the blessings we now enjoy in a limited way will then be ours to enjoy fully.

From the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem (which is described in Rev. 21) as well as from the fact that in some ways we will be "as angels of God in heaven" (Matt. 22:30) who now have access to the earth, it would seem that the inhabitants of the new heaven will not be cut off from those of the new earth throughout eternity, but that there will be contact and fellowship between the two groups of believers.

5. A concluding remark: The fact that there is a new heaven and a new earth in the eternal state gives added proof of the fact that Israel and the Church are distinct groups, always separate from each other in the purposes of God.

-- Notes prepared by L. Dwight Custis
July 1967