

Genesis, Part 6 Dispensations

With the creation of Adam and the woman, their testing with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, their failure, and God's judgment upon them and the serpent, a pattern has been established that will be repeated six more times before mankind enters eternity. That pattern will be seen as follows:

1. Man is placed in a position of blessing.
2. Man is given a test.
3. Man fails that test.
4. Man faces judgment for his failure.

We will see this exact pattern repeated from now on all the way through Revelation – six more times for a total of seven cycles. It has a name. We call it the “Doctrine of Dispensations,” and I am not using that word in the same sense it is used in the Roman church, in other words, this is not “an exemption from a rule or usual requirement,” which is how they use it. These periods, sometimes called “eras,” are depicted in Scripture and follow the above recognizable pattern. Identifying and understanding these divisions with their divine purposes is essential to fully comprehend God's Divine Plan.

Divine revelation unfolds progressively. With each successive era, God reveals more of Himself, more of His plan, and more of man's part in it. God revealed more to the Israelites than He did to Adam and more to the Church than He did to the Israelites. Truth in the earlier periods is not discarded but rather built upon. Thus truth does not change but is cumulative. Our knowledge and understanding of God's divine plan for man increases with the passing ages, as God reveals more details of His plan. This is called “progressive revelation.” Progressive revelation is at the core of dispensations.

God's plan and human history can be plotted linearly and divided into definable epochs, ages, eras, or dispensations. All of this is carefully laid out in Scripture for those who have eyes to see. Understanding dispensations probably sheds more light on the whole message of Scripture than any other aspect of Bible study. Dispensations are the

progressive and connected revelation of God's dealings with man. They apply sometimes to the whole race of mankind and, at other times, only to a particular people, such as Israel or the Church.

The Greek word from which we get "dispensations" is *oikonomia* (Eph 1:10; 3:2).

Eph 1:7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸ which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Eph 3:2 Assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you

The word "plan" (ESV) in verse 10 is the Greek word *oikonomia*. It is translated as "dispensation" in the NKJV. In Ephesians 3:2 it is translated as "stewardship" (ESV) and "dispensation" in the NKJV. Our English word "economy" is a transliteration from the Greek. In Greek, it means "the management of a household or household affairs" and is sometimes translated "as stewardship," or "fullness of time," "time," "plan," or "dispensation." Another Greek word that relates to this subject is *aion*, which means an age, or dispensation and is often incorrectly translated as "world."

The purpose of each dispensation is to place man under a specific rule of conduct and testing, but such stewardship is *not a condition of salvation*. Salvation is, always was and always will be by faith alone. Before the Cross, such saving faith looked *forward* to it in the context of whatever information God had revealed to mankind concerning the details of His plan of salvation at that point (progressive revelation). After the Cross, we look *back* in faith to the work Christ did there as a propitiation for our sins.

This dispensation timeline is divided into seven periods. Each of these seven eras or periods of human history begins with man being divinely

placed in a new position of privilege and responsibility, and each closes with the failure of man and God's righteous judgments. These tests and resulting failures are to teach man about himself and God and His divine plan for man. The great lesson to be learned is the utter inability of man to effectively function in the Devil's world without God's help, and that man cannot find righteousness apart from God. Keep that in mind as we study the dispensations.

Age of Innocence

The first dispensational period was the Garden of Eden. Its charge is found in Genesis 1:28.

Gen 1:28 Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

It began with the creation of Adam and the woman and ended with the expulsion from the Garden and is called the "Age of Innocence". Man was created perfect and innocent, placed in a perfect environment, subjected to one simple test of obedience, and warned of the consequences of disobedience. Though tempted by Satan, man, and the woman made free will choices to be disobedient. The stewardship of innocence ended in judgment by God and expulsion from Eden (Gen 3:24), and with God's judgment on them, a new dispensation began.

Lesson Learned: If in the God-created and truly perfect conditions of the Garden, man still sinned, how then are we to expect man to change for the better in a manmade socially-engineered environment?

Age of Conscience

The second dispensation, called the "Age of Conscience" or "Moral Responsibility," also called the "Antediluvian Dispensation," lasted 1656 years. It began with the fall and ends with the Flood. This dispensation represents a change from the theoretical to experiential knowledge of good and evil (Gen 3:5-7, 22). Conscience is a knowledge of good and evil, and this Adam and Eve did not have until they ate that forbidden fruit. With such

knowledge, man was placed by God under the stewardship of moral responsibility, whereby he is held accountable to live according to his conscience in keeping with such knowledge of God as was given to him, that is do all known good and abstain from evil and approach God through blood sacrifices instituted during this dispensation. Though God gave man a rudimentary knowledge of His standards during the Age of Conscience, conscience alone failed to produce righteousness. Man failed the test given to him (Gen. 6:5) and was judged with the Flood.

Lesson Learned: This test proved that the knowledge of right and wrong with a human conscience will not in itself produce moral behavior.

Age of Human Government

The third dispensation is the “Age of Human Government” and began when Noah and his family left the ark and ended at the Tower of Babel (Gen 8:20-11:9). In the preceding dispensation the restraint was internal. Now a new and external restraint is added the power of civil government. Man was subjected to a new test. Although man’s direct responsibility to God continued (conscience), God delegated to him certain areas of His authority, in which he was to obey God through submission to his fellow man, a corporate relationship of man to man through human government.

The divine institution of government was established to regulate man’s behavior. Instead, man used government in an attempt to usurp God’s divinity and become independent of God through astrology. The Dispensation of Human Government ended on the plains of Shinar, in the impious attempt by man to become independent of God. Man failed to rule righteously. This failure is seen racially in the confusion of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9). However, man’s responsibility for government did not cease but will continue until Christ sets up His Kingdom, then man’s rule will finally be superseded by the glorious reign of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Lesson Learned: So much for government solving our problems. Government’s purpose in the divine plan is limited to guaranteeing an atmosphere of human freedom for man to establish and maintain a right relationship with his Creator. When government goes beyond that simple

and basic function and takes upon itself the responsibilities and powers reserved to God is when we have problems.

Age of Promise

The fourth dispensation is the “Age of the Promise” and began with the calling out of Abram (Gen 12) and goes to Moses and the giving of the Law.

Gen 12:1 Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Its stewardship is based on God’s covenant with Abraham first cited in Genesis 12:1-3 and confirmed and enlarged in Genesis 13:14-17; 15:1-7; 17:1-8, 15-19; 22:16-18; 26:2-5, 24; 28:13-15; 31:13; 35:9-12. Only Abraham and his descendants were to be under this new system. The rest of mankind continued under the limitations of conscience and human government. A new species was created, the racial Jew, and with it a responsibility to remain in a place of blessing, the land God showed Abraham.

This dispensation was designed to teach man that he must depend on God. It represented a system of grace in that God would provide all that man needed. The only condition required was that man must trust the promises of God to deliver. Abram did not immediately follow God’s instructions. Told by God to leave his family, he took his father and did not immediately go to the land that God would show him. When God later promised him a son, and that son was not forthcoming, Abram and his wife Seri took matters into their own hands, and Abram produced a son through Seri’s slave, thinking that would satisfy the promise. That is human works, and God always rejects human works. Abraham did eventually trust God, and his son Isaac was born to him to fulfill the promises of God. Subsequent generations of Israelites also failed to trust God’s promises, and they ultimately ended up in slavery in Egypt.

Lesson Learned: Believe what God tells you and do it exactly as He says to do it. This is grace in its most basic form. Abraham and his prodigy failed the grace test.

Age of Israel

The fifth dispensation is the “Age of Israel,” sometimes called the “Dispensation of the Law”. It began with the calling out of Israel from bondage in Egypt and, except for an interruption by the Age of Grace (Church Age), it goes to the end of the Tribulation. Again the grace of God came to man’s aid, and God redeemed His chosen people out of bondage in Egypt and, through the instrument of Moses, delivered His chosen people from slavery. This is a “type” or picture of the redemption God would provide through the work of Christ on the Cross. Israel did not deserve, earn, or even participate in their deliverance from bondage. They resisted it and complained. God did all the work. It is exactly the same way with salvation. God does all the work; man only believes or trusts in that work. Man does not contribute to, earn, or deserve the free gift of deliverance from the bondage of sin. Israel was delivered from bondage in Egypt by grace through faith and apart from works.

In the wilderness, God proposed to the Israelites a Covenant of Law, in that He promised them blessings if they kept the Covenant and discipline if they broke the Law. This was a proposal that God would shift from dealing with them through a system of grace to a merit system. The Mosaic Law was directed to Israel alone, and Gentiles were not judged under its standards. The rest of mankind continued under the limitations of conscience and human government.

The Law was designed for Israel, given to Israel, and applies only to Israel. The Law was a system designed to produce a measure of discipline and control in Israel. It was a merit system by which Israel would have to earn their blessings and faced severe discipline for failure to meet its strict requirements (Deut. 28). Hence the Law’s function concerning Israel was one of disciplinary restriction and correction. It was to hold Israel in check for her own good (Deut. 6:24), until Christ came and with Him the promise of a spiritual life under grace that would supersede the Law and its failures.

God knew that man could not meet the Law's perfect standard and would sin, so He provided a system of blood offerings by which the sinning Israelite could find atonement for sins and be declared judicially "blameless" under the terms of the covenant. It is a merit system that was totally dependent upon human effort to meet its conditions.

The Law did not produce righteousness in the Israelites. The history of Israel under the Mosaic Covenant is a long record of flagrant and persistent violations of the Law. Israel misinterpreted the purpose of the Law (1 Tim. 1:8-10), sought righteousness by good deeds and ceremonial observances (Acts 15:1; Rom. 9:31-10:3), and rejected their own Messiah (John 1:10-11).

After multiple warnings through the prophets, God brought down judgment on Israel. First, the Northern Kingdom went into slavery, then Judah. Returned to the land once more, then came the Messiah "born of a woman – made under the Law," and Israel, neck-deep in religious apostasy, conspired to kill Him. For its apostasy and failure under the Law, Israel was again destroyed as a nation in AD70, exactly as prophesied by Moses (Deut. 28:63-64). Israel yet faces its final discipline along with an unbelieving world and the apostate Christian church, during the final seven years of the Age of Israel that we know as the Tribulation.

With Israel's rejection of the offered Messiah and, with Him the promised Kingdom, God gave the Messiah to the Gentiles instead. In so doing He interrupted the Age of Israel with seven years remaining and inserted in the sixth dispensation, called the "Church Age" or the "Dispensation of Grace".

The Church Age

The sixth dispensation, the Church Age or Dispensation of Grace, is a parenthetical dispensation inserted into the Age of Israel before it was completed. We determine this mainly from a study of the events associated with the Age of Israel, as pictured in Daniel 9. Israel, however, was not shown the Church Age in Daniel's prophecy because the Church Age was a *musterion* or "mystery" kept hidden from the foundations of the heavens and the earth (Ro. 16:25; 1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:26). Daniel's prophecy concerned "his" people and not the Gentiles. The Church Age is therefore a

Gentile age, as God gave the rejected Messiah to the Gentiles after Israel rejected Him.

We are currently in the Church Age. It began on the day of Pentecost in AD30 when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples, but we do not know when it will end. That may be in a thousand years, ten years, or tomorrow. We do know that when it ends the Age of Israel will resume. Israel is owed seven years which we know as the Tribulation when God will judge an unbelieving world and bring Israel to national redemption.

The Church Age was announced by Jesus Christ in Matthew 12:47-13:52. Jesus spoke of the Church Age in parables so the Israelites who were not believers would not understand (Mat. 13:10-13). The “mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” Jesus speaks of are the spiritual aspects of the Kingdom Age that believers in the Church Age can experience. What are those mysteries? They would include the indwelling and potential empowerment of the Holy Spirit of all believers, an awesome power source experienced by very few in all the previous ages. This power source in the Holy Spirit would enable Church Age believers to have real victory over sin and a deep and personal relationship with the Creator only rarely seen under the Law. Thus there exists a huge difference between the Age of Israel and the inserted Church Age, and that would be the spiritual aspect of the promised Kingdom, the indwelling and potential for filling by the Holy Spirit.

The spiritual system during the Age of Israel was the merit system called the “Law” or the “Mosaic Covenant”. The Law was given to Israel, and it pertains to Israel (Neh. 9:13-14; Eze. 20:10-12; Deut. 5:1-3; Rom. 9:13). We, in the Church Age, are not under the Law (Gal. 5:18; Rom. 6:14). Believers in the Church Age are under a far higher standard – grace. We have the divine enablement of the Holy Spirit, the same enablement that Jesus used during His 33 years on earth. It is faith-based in that we trust in God to enable us to do His will. The Law depended on human power, and grace depends on divine power. A believer operating under the Spirit is meeting the terms of the Law (Gal 5:16, 22-23). This enabling power of the Holy Spirit was not available to Israel on a universal basis during the Age of Israel.

With the Church Age, man was presented with a new test: Would he trust in his own abilities and the Law, or would he trust in God's provisions of grace? Man has failed the test! Few men can let go of their own arrogance and trust God. Instead, they get involved with legalistic practices like tithing, Sabbath keeping, and working for their salvation.

Gal 2:21 I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness *comes* through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.

Lesson Learned: Under grace, failure was evident, as grace produced neither worldwide acceptance of Christ nor a triumphant Church. Such failure was predicted by Scripture (1 Tim 4:1-3; 2 Tim 3:1-13; 2 Peter 2-3; Jude).

The Rapture...

Eventually, the Church Age will end, and the Age of Israel will resume to complete Daniel's Seventy Weeks. The event that will conclude the Church Age is called "The Rapture of the Church," or just the "Rapture," and sometimes the "Resurrection of the Church". Christ will return for His Bride and spirit believers away to Heaven with Him (1 Cor 15:50-54; 1 Thess 4:13-18). Meanwhile, judgment comes for the professing church during the Tribulation that follows.

The Tribulation

The Church has not replaced Israel and God is not done with Israel. The Tribulation is a continuation of the Age of Israel that was interrupted by the Church Age. It is a time of judgment upon Israel and the professing Church left behind in the Rapture. Daniel's prophecy says it is seven years long divided into two halves of 3.5 years each. The second half is called the "Great Tribulation". It is a time of extreme violence including worldwide natural disasters, manmade disasters, and divine judgments.

The ultimate objective depends on the viewpoint of the main players. For God, it is a time of judgment on a Christ-rejecting world and Israel for her religious apostasy, and rejecting and murdering her Messiah.

The first great purpose of the Tribulation is to prepare Israel for her Messiah (Deut. 3:30; Jer. 30:7; Ezek. 20:37; Dan. 12:1; Zech. 13:8-9;

Matthew 24:9-26). With the true Church gone, God turns His attention back to His Chosen People, Israel. Deuteronomy 30:1-6 and Jeremiah 30:8-10 speak of how God will bring His people back from their dispersion and bring the nation to redemption.

The second purpose of the Tribulation is for God to pour out His judgment on an unbelieving world (Jer. 25:32-33; Isa. 26:21; 2 Thess. 2:12). God will judge the nations of the earth for their unbelief, for their rejection of His provisions for salvation, and for their failure to meet His standard of righteousness.

During the Tribulation, Satan will attempt to fool mankind into believing that the Antichrist, a worldwide ruler, is the Messiah and he has come to set up His Kingdom as promised. Many will be deceived, and the apostate church will actively participate in and assist that deception.

The objective of Satan in the Tribulation is the destruction of all Jews. It is his last chance at winning his appeal trial. If he can kill all those who are to be the recipients of the four unconditional covenants made to Israel by God, he can make God a liar unable to keep his promises and thus unqualified to sit in judgment on Satan.

The Tribulation is terminated by the sudden return of Jesus Christ to defeat the armies of Satan and establish His rule on earth.

Lesson Learned: The lesson for man is the Law could not save him or even produce righteousness because it totally depended upon human effort to execute (Rom. 8:3-4). No man was ever or is ever justified and made righteous by the deeds of the Law (Rom. 3:20; Heb. 7:19; Acts 13:39). The Law required 100% compliance and no one could meet that perfect standard (James 2:10). If you are a “Law-keeper,” Jew or Christian, you are condemned to failure. All the law could do was reveal the perfect standard and righteousness of God and make man aware of his sinfulness. Through the Law, God was demonstrating that every man was guilty and a redeemer was needed.

The Millennium

The seventh dispensational period of human history follows the Tribulation and Second Advent and is called the “Millennium,” or as called by the Israelites, the “Kingdom”. This is the period of the righteous reign of Messiah here on earth. Only the righteous will be allowed to enter into it. The unrighteous will be denied entrance. (Sheep and goats judgment at the Second Advent.)

Israel saw the Kingdom as literal, physical, earthly, and eternal, fulfilling the unconditional covenants. The Church sees it more spiritually, although earthly and literal, and 1,000 years long. It is, in effect, eternal in that the Dispensation of the Millennium ends after 1,000 years and transitions into eternity with the last judgment and the creation of the New Heavens and New Earth.

During the Kingdom/Millennium, Satan will be locked up in the Abyss (Rev 20:1-3). The absence of Satan and his demons will mean they will be unable to influence man to evil. While the Kingdom will be a period very similar to the Garden, it will have one major difference: Adam and the woman had no knowledge of good and evil or a sin nature, but the believers entering the Kingdom in their physical bodies will have such knowledge and a fully functioning sin nature.

In the Kingdom Age, the curse on Earth is lifted. Under the theocratic rulership of Christ the whole of creation, mankind, and Earth, will be fully redeemed as God’s lost possessions and formerly presented to Him by Christ in their glorified states.

It will be a time of fulfillment of the Four Unconditional Covenants Satan tried to prevent during the Tribulation.

- Abrahamic – Israel will be a great nation, and all the world will be blessed
- Palestinian – Israel in the land forever
- Davidic – Son of David (Jesus Christ) is on the throne forever
- New Covenant – Holy Spirit indwelling, full knowledge of God, peace, forgiveness of sins, Israel restored

The conditions that characterize the Millennium will be very like those of the Garden with one difference: Man will have a sin nature and the knowledge of good and evil.

- The Millennium is characterized in Scripture as a righteous period. Millennium righteousness is synonymous with Messiah (Isa. 46:13; 51:5).
- The Kingdom will be characterized by obedience. Hebrews 10:9 says God will bring all things into subjection to the One who said “I come to do thy will, O God.”
- The Kingdom will be characterized by Holiness. Israel will be Messiah’s dwelling place and His people will no more defile His holy name (Ezek 43:7).
- The Kingdom will be characterized by truth. John 14:6 says “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” There will be a full manifestation of truth in the Millennium.
- The Kingdom is characterized by the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Joel 2:28-29.
- Satan has been cast into the Abyss and his direct influence in the lives of men and women prevented.

And sin will NOT be tolerated during the Kingdom Age. The “iron scepter” (rod of iron) rule of Christ as ruler and judge demands complete obedience to His moral code by all – believer and unbeliever alike. Otherwise, how could this resemble the Garden when man did not yet know of evil and had not sinned? But the “genie” of sin cannot be put back into the bottle and will be dealt with during this time in the strictest sense. In Revelation 19:15, you will see that Christ “shall rule them with a rod of iron.” Now go look at Isaiah 11:4; Revelation 2:27, 12:5; and Psalm 2:9, and you will see reference to this rod of iron again. The fifth chapter of Matthew also speaks of this strict policy regarding sin. This is a “zero tolerance” policy. Sin will be dealt with immediately and severely. Turn the other cheek! Don’t retaliate when struck! You won’t need to, because your attacker will immediately be dealt with by the Judge Himself, or one of His designated judges in a resurrection body, (1 Cor 6:1-2; Rev 20:4). The iron scepter of Christ as ruler and judge demands complete obedience by all to His moral code.

Life expectancy will be unlimited, and those in physical bodies present will have children and they will have children. Some will reject the truth of the

Gospel and chafe under the iron scepter. While going along with the rules imposed, they will be only paying lip service to them and hating every minute. This bunch will revolt in the Gog Revolution when Satan is released near the end of the 1,000 years (Rev 20:7-10). It is called a “battle,” but I am not sure this is a war in the same sense as we understand it. The weapons of war were destroyed a thousand years before and man “would learn war no more” (Isa 2:1-4; Micah 4:1-4). This seems to be a revolt that will expose the impostors and will be quickly put down by Christ.

Once more placed in the perfect environment like the Garden and under a strict moral code mankind has a new test: Will man find righteousness apart from a relationship with God? Once more mankind fails when Satan is released from the Abyss and leads a rebellion of unbelievers who have been only pretending to follow Christ.

The Millennium is terminated with the White Throne Judgment (Rev 20:11-15) when all unbelievers face judgment, are found guilty, and are sentenced to the Lake of Fire along with Satan. Believers enter into the glory of eternity in Heaven in the presence of God.

Lesson Learned: Even with the perfect conditions of the Garden and Christ present and reigning, man will still fail and rebel. Only if man is returned to the original state or purity in which God created him can he have true eternal life with God.

Conclusion

These seven dispensations are hidden in plain view in the Bible. With a little research, they can be discerned and their purpose understood. They are designed by God for three main purposes:

- Bring fallen man and His lost creation back to the condition in which He created it.
- A series of tests, failures, and judgments, give man awareness of himself and his fallen nature and teach him about God’s perfect righteousness and standards.
- Allow Satan’s appeal trial to run out and prove once and forever that his sentence to the Lake of Fire is a just one.

We have seen how God has spent thousands of years demonstrating to man that the only way is His way.

- Man failed in the perfect environment of the Garden
- The Age of Conscience demonstrated that human conscience could maintain no control over man's sin nature and did not produce righteousness.
- The Age of Human Government demonstrated that government is not the solution either.
- The Age of Promise proved the promise of future blessings did not produce obedience in man.
- The Age of Israel and the Law with its immediate blessings or discipline based on keeping the Law also failed to produce righteousness in mankind.
- The Church Age with God's gracious provisions for the spiritual life failed to produce righteousness in all men. It did, however, produce righteousness in the few who trusted in God's grace, proving that victory over sin was indeed possible for those who did trust in God's grace.
- The Church Age in many ways is a preview of the Kingdom Age, where God will once and for all time demonstrate that righteousness is not only required but possible. But even during the Kingdom Age with the King reigning on Earth with a rod of iron, man will still resist the call to righteousness. Only in eternity can man find perfect God-like righteousness.