

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE - LESSON 5

RECOGNIZING THE DISPENSATIONS



In our last lesson, we dealt with an important principle of Bible study “rightly dividing the Word of truth.” This is sometimes also called the principle of the dispensations.

GOD NEVER CHANGES.

THE MORAL REQUIREMENTS OF GOD NEVER CHANGE.

BUT...

**THE SYSTEM BY WHICH GOD GOVERNS THE WORLD HAS CHANGED
AT VARIOUS TIMES OVER THE COURSE OF HISTORY.**

It is crucial to recognize this principle in understanding the Bible. The following quotation well sums up this need:

For many people the Bible just doesn't seem to make sense. It seems to be filled with contradictions. In one place it states that man should eat only fruits and vegetables; in another it says that every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for people; and in still another a long list of animals, birds and fish are classified as unclean and forbidden as food. Then, the apostle Paul comes on the scene and announces that every creature is good and nothing is to be refused (see Genesis 1:29; 9:3; Leviticus 11; 1 Timothy 4:4). In one place, the Bible states that if a man is not circumcised he shall be cut off from God's people, and in another that Christ will be of no profit to a man who is circumcised (see Genesis 17:12-14 and Galatians 5:2). In one place Christ tells His disciples to preach only to Israelites and not to Gentiles; in another place He tells them to go to all men (see Matthew 10:5,6 and 28:19).

What is the explanation for these and many other seeming contradictions? The Bible itself instructs us to rightly divide the Word of Truth (2 Timothy 2:15). This means that we must distinguish between the various dispensations of God's dealings with mankind. In the first dispensation, before man fell into sin, God limited his food to fruits and vegetables. After the flood, He permitted man to eat all kinds of animal flesh besides. Later, He placed Israel under the Law and limited their diet to certain clean animals. When Israel rejected Christ, He cast that nation aside and turned to the Gentiles (see Acts 13:46).

He gave to the Apostle Paul the revelation of truth for this present dispensation in which we now live, called the “dispensation of the grace of God” (see Ephesians 3:2-9). Many things are different in this dispensation. When we distinguish the dispensations, everything falls into place and the Bible makes sense.

(Taken from What We Believe Concerning Dispensationalism, Grace Publications Inc., Grand Rapids, MI)

THE DISPENSATIONS OF SCRIPTURE

God has manifested His will in what is commonly known as *dispensations*. A dispensation should never be regarded as a period of time, as its counterpart, although it is correct to say that it does cover time. The word simply means, “A mode of dealing out, an arrangement or administration of affairs.” The only hope that mankind ever had of knowing the will of God was through direct revelations. These revelations were given or *dispensed* to holy men of God who were led by the Spirit. While the attributes of God are *immutable* (unchangeable), He does *change* His dealings with mankind.

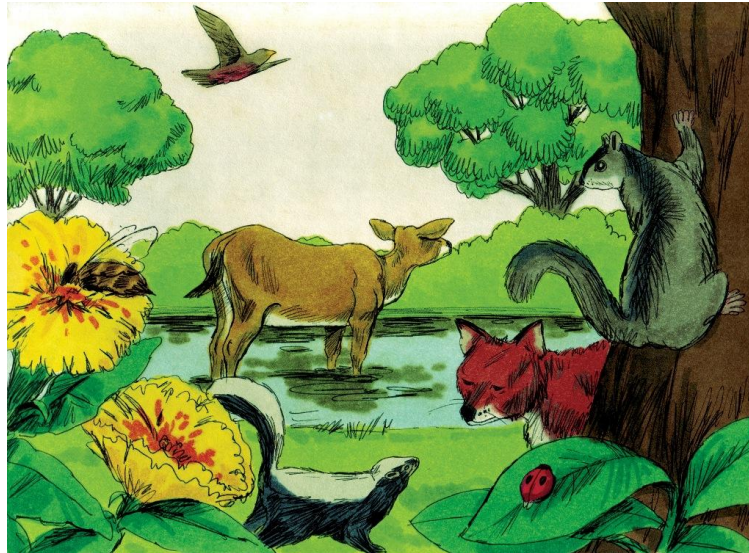
We hold the position that there are eight dispensations:

1. Dispensation of Innocence (Genesis 1:27-28).
2. Dispensation of Conscience (Genesis 3:7; Romans 2:14-15).
3. Dispensation of Human Government (Genesis 9:1-7).
4. Dispensation of Promise (Genesis 12:1-3; 13:14-17).
5. Dispensation of the Law (Exodus 19, 20).
6. Dispensation of Grace (Ephesians 3:1-6).
7. Dispensation of Divine Government (Psalm 2:1-12; Revelation 11:15-19; 20).
8. Dispensation of the Fullness of Times (Ephesians 1:10; 2 Peter 3:12-13).

It is interesting that each dispensation begins with a *probationary* period which serves as a time of testing. With this in mind, the course of each dispensation basically follows the same pattern: the dispensing of God’s will, human responsibility, man’s failure, and God’s judgment. God has placed man under a different set of circumstances in each dispensation, to demonstrate that man is a sinner in desperate need of a Saviour.

(Source: “Dispensationalism” by Pastor Paul M. Sadler, D.D. * see pages 6-11 of <https://www.bereanbiblesociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/February-Berean-Searchlight.pdf>)

1. THE DISPENSATION OF INNOCENCE (AGE OF LIBERTY)



1. Please carefully read Genesis 1:26-31. _____ (Check)
(v. 28) What instructions did God give to Adam? _____

_____.
2. (v. 31) How did God describe His creation? _____.
3. (Genesis 2:15-17) What command did God give to Adam? _____

_____.

We know from previous study that Adam and Eve disobeyed God. As a result they were no longer innocent; sin and death had entered the world. The woman, the man, and the earth all bear a curse because of this sin.

4. (Romans 5:12) What happened because of Adam's sin? _____
_____.

The first dispensation ended when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit. The curse came into effect because of Adam's sin. We now live in a groaning creation, where death, pain and adversity are allowed to exist (Rom. 8:2).

Outline:

A. **God's Will:** God was dealing with man in his innocence.

1. Man created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26,27).
2. Man created to rule (Gen. 1:26,27).
3. Man to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28).
4. Perfect environment—man was to be a vegetarian (Gen. 2:5,8,9).

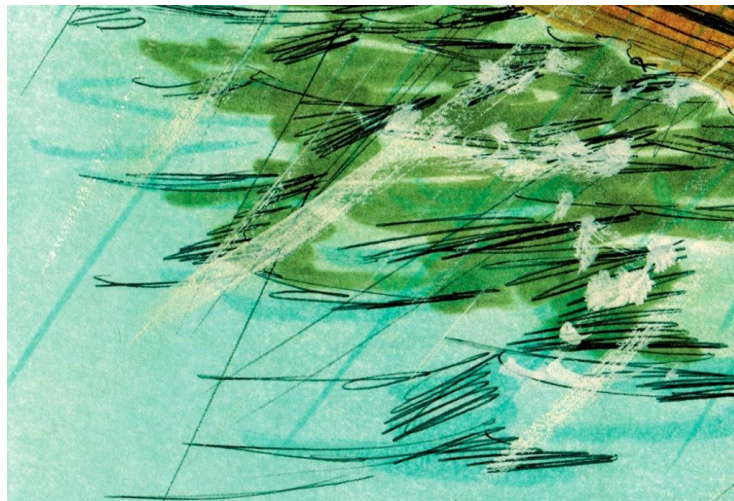
B. **Human responsibility** was to guard the garden and to *abstain* from partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:16,17).

C. **Man's failure** came when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, resulting in the entrance of sin and death (Gen. 3:6).

D. **God's Judgment:** The pronouncement of the *curse* and expulsion from the garden (Gen. 3:14-19,23,24).

It is noteworthy that even though God is no longer dealing with man in innocence, there are aspects of the original revelation given to Adam that are *still* binding today. For example, the command to be fruitful and multiply has never been rescinded and the consequence of sin remains the same—DEATH! (Rom. 6:23).

2. THE DISPENSATION OF CONSCIENCE (THE AGE OF THE NATIONS)



5. (Genesis 3:22-24) What final action did God take after Adam's sin? _____

Man was forced to live outside of the garden in a sinful, hostile world. Fellowship with God was still possible as man sought to please God by living according to the dictates of his conscience.

6. The history of Cain and Abel demonstrated the sinfulness which had entered the world.

Please read carefully Genesis 4:1-26. _____ (Check)

7. Look up Genesis 6:1-8. This passage summarizes what happened on the earth during the dispensation of conscience.

(Gen. 6:5) What had happened to mankind? _____

(v. 7) What did God determine to do because of this? _____

Please read Genesis 7:10-24. This portion tells the history of the Great Flood which destroyed the entire surface of the earth. _____ (Check)

Outline:

A. **God's Will:** God dispensed conscience, which indicates that man had come to a knowledge of good and evil. Conscience means *to know*.

1. Adam and Eve *knew* they were naked after they disobeyed God (Gen. 3:7).
2. The First Civilization was established (Gen. 4:16-24).

B. **Human Responsibility:** Now that conscience was to govern man, God required them to do good and refrain from all forms of evil (Gen. 3:22).

1. God commanded Cain and Abel to bring a blood sacrifice to be accepted by Him (Gen. 4:1-4).
2. God required *faith* (Heb. 11:4).

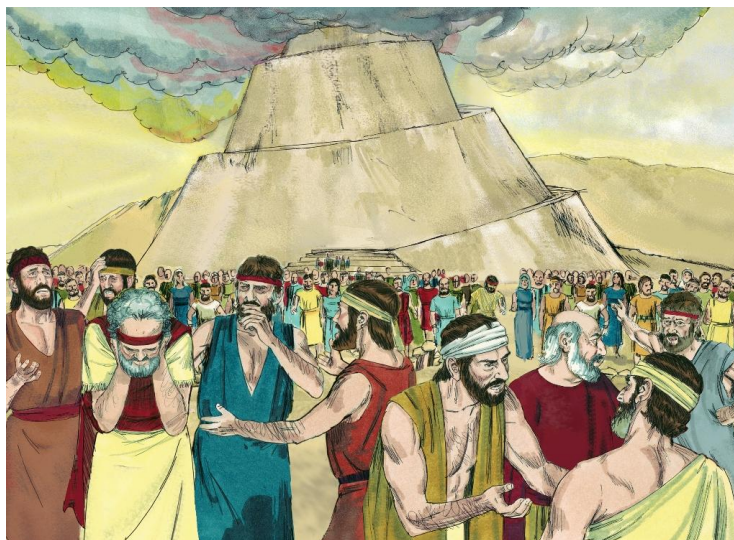
C. **Man's Failure:** Cain disobeyed God and in a jealous rage murdered his brother Abel (Gen. 4:5-15).

1. The polygamy of that day was in direct disobedience to God's command that marriage is to be between one man and one woman (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5,6 cf. Gen. 4:19).
2. Violence filled the earth because men refused to heed their conscience (Gen. 6:13).

D. **God's Judgment:** The universal flood in the days of Noah (Gen. 6:17).

The believer today, of course, is not required to offer blood sacrifices nor to build an ark. Everyone, however, does have a conscience and knows inwardly the basic difference between right and wrong (Rom. 2:14,15).

3. THE DISPENSATION OF HUMAN GOVERNMENT (CONTINUATION OF THE AGE OF THE NATIONS)



Noah and his wife, his three sons, Ham, Shem and Japheth along with their wives were delivered through the flood. From these eight people the earth was repopulated. With Noah, after the flood, begins another dispensation, that of Human Government.

8. One of the ways we recognize a dispensational change is by an abrupt change in a command and/or the addition of new instructions. According to Genesis 9:3-4, what was Noah's dietary command? _____

(v. 3; also Gen. 1:29) What had the previous command been? _____

9. When Cain murdered Abel, God did not allow man to punish Cain by taking his life (see Gen. 4:15). Read Genesis 9:5-6. What new command does God give regarding those who commit murder ("sheds man's blood")? _____

Under the dispensation of conscience, man was ruled directly by God who retained the right of life and death. This new command concerning capital punishment implied that God was now giving men authority to govern other men.

10. God's command to Noah was "be fruitful and multiply; populate the earth abundantly and multiply in it" (Gen. 9:7). Refer to Gen. 11: 1-4. What did men choose to do instead of obeying God? _____

The Tower of Babel represented man's rebellion against God. The scattering of the people and confusion of languages represented the judgment of God (Gen. 11:8-9)

Outline:

A. **God's Will:** God revealed that man was now to *govern*, which strongly implies the rise of nations.

1. The fear of man was placed on the beast of the field (Gen. 9:2).
2. Man was permitted to eat meat (Gen. 9:3).
3. Human government was established (Gen. 9:5,6).

B. **Human Responsibility:** man bears the responsibility to establish laws that are in accordance with the righteous standard of God.

1. God's law states, "Whosoever sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for the image of God made He man" (Gen. 9:6). Hence, man is responsible to administer capital punishment.
2. "Be fruitful and multiply" should have resulted in the human race dispersing to the ends of the earth (Gen. 9:7).

C. **Man's Failure:** If there is one thing the human race does consistently, it is *fail*. And fail they did, when they sought to unite together and defy God's command to populate the earth (Gen. 11:4).

1. Their desire to BE KNOWN meant that they had neglected to implement some form of human government, which produced the spirit of lawlessness spoken of in Romans 1.
2. The erection of the so-called Tower of Babel was also in defiance of the Holy One of heaven as evil men desired to pay homage to the *astrological signs* of the heavens (Gen. 11:3,4 cf. Rom. 1:22,23).

D. **God's Judgment** was swift as He confounded their language, thus forcing them to scatter abroad (Gen. 11:7-9).

4. THE DISPENSATION OF PROMISE (AGE OF THE JEWISH NATION)



Under the dispensation of human government, man was given authority to govern man and God was dealing directly with all the world. Under the dispensation of promise, the human government continued but God began to narrow the focus of His direct interaction with man.

God was still concerned for the entire world but to reach that world and to speak to it, He selected a nation, a Chosen People, through whom He would work. The dispensation of Promise began with the call of Abram in Genesis 12:1-3.

11. Please carefully read Gen. 12:1-3. _____ (Check)
12. (v. 1) What did God call Abram to do? _____
_____.
13. (vv. 2-3) List any two of the promises made to Abram.
 - 1) _____
_____;
 - 2) _____
_____.
14. (Gen. 15:5) How does God describe the number of Abram's descendants? _____
_____.
15. (Gen. 15:18) Describe the boundaries of the land promised to Abram? _____
_____.
16. (Gen. 17:9-18) What was Abraham to do with every male in his household and what did this ceremony mean? _____
_____.

17. Please carefully read Genesis 26:1-5. _____ (Check) Abraham and Sarah had a son named Isaac.
(v. 2) What did God tell Isaac to do? _____
_____.
(vv. 3-4) What promise did God make to Isaac? _____
_____.
_____.
18. Please read carefully Gen. 28:10-15. _____ (Check) Isaac and Rebekah had a son named Jacob. (v. 13-15). This portion tells the history of Jacob's dream about a ladder. What promise did God make to Jacob? _____

_____.
19. Please read carefully Gen. 32:22-32. _____ (Check)
This is the history of Jacob's wrestling match. What new name was given to Jacob? _____.
The nation of Israel began here as Jacob's name was changed. The twelve tribes of Israel descend from ten of Jacob's sons and two of his grandsons. The dispensation of Promise continued through the book of Genesis and into Exodus when Israel was delivered from bondage in Egypt.

Outline:

A. **God's Will:** God dispensed a promise to Abraham that his seed would be multiplied as the stars of heaven.

1. The promise included:

- a. A *land* called Canaan that bordered the Nile River to the South and extended to the River Euphrates to the East (Gen. 15:18).
- b. A *nation* known as Israel (Gen. 12:2).
- c. Worldwide *blessing* (Gen. 12:3).

2. Circumcision was mandatory as a seal of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 17:9-14).

B. **Human Responsibility:** The promise that God made with Abraham was *unconditional*.

1. Abraham's descendants were responsible to *trust* God to fulfil the promise (Genesis 26:1-4; 28:10-15).
2. With privilege always comes responsibility. In this case they were to occupy the land God had given them.

C. **Man's Failure:** One lapse of faith after another seemed to plague the descendants of Israel in its early history.

1. Isaac, for example, reluctantly obeyed the Word of the Lord not to go down to Egypt when a famine came upon the land. He did, however, move to Gerar, which is about as close to Egypt as one could get without actually being there (Gen. 26:1-6).
2. Jacob stole the birthright from Esau (Gen. 25:24-34).

3. Israel forsook the land of her forefathers and moved to Egypt (Gen. 41:54-57 cf. 46:26). This is a good example of the *permissive* will of God.

D. **God's Judgment:** God's chastisement was to allow Israel to remain in bondage to the Egyptians for 400 years. This made Israel appreciate more fully the forsaken promised land (Ex. 1:7-22).

5. THE DISPENSATION OF THE LAW (CONTINUATION OF THE AGE OF THE JEWISH NATION)



In our last lesson we studied the man Moses. It was Moses whom God used to deliver Israel out of bondage in Egypt. Through Moses God gave the Law to Israel on Mt. Sinai and turned them from a disorganized mob into an orderly nation with a civil, military and religious structure. It was God's intention to bless the nation of Israel and through them, reach the world.

20. (Exodus 19:5-6) What did God promise Israel if they would obey Him? _____

_____.
21. (Deuteronomy 28:1-2) What did God promise Israel in these verses if they would obey Him?
(v. 1) _____.
(v. 2) _____.
(See vs. 3-14 for further details of the blessings.)
22. (Deuteronomy 28:15) What warning did God give if they did not obey? _____
_____.
(See v. 16 and the following verses for details of the curses.)

Under the dispensation of law, Israel was God's chosen people. If they had obeyed, God would have blessed them and the nations of the earth would have been drawn to God by what they saw happening in Israel. Sometimes this happened as we will see in the following examples.

23. Jethro was a Midianite priest and the father-in-law of Moses.

Carefully read Exodus 18:8-12. What did Jethro do when he heard about all that God had done for Israel? _____

_____.

24. Please carefully read Joshua 2:8-11. ____ (Check)

Rahab is the woman who helped the Israelite spies when they came to Jericho.

(v. 11) What had happened in Jericho when the people there heard about all that God had done for Israel? _____

_____.

(v. 11b) What had the people of Jericho come to understand about God? _____

_____.

The incidents with Jethro and the people of Jericho demonstrated the way in which God wanted to use Israel in the Old Testament. The Bible shows, however, that under the dispensation of law, Israel generally failed to obey. While there are bright spots in the history of the nation and times when God did use them, the overall witness is that Israel sinned and was judged by God. The book of Malachi shows the condition of the nation as the Old Testament came to a close.

The Old Testament prophets arose and called Israel to repent and return to God. They prophesied judgment if the nation would not repent. The prophets also spoke of a Messiah, one who would restore and redeem the nation. They also spoke of a Kingdom which the Messiah would establish upon the earth, an earthly Kingdom of the Jews over which Christ the Messiah would rule.

The Old Testament closed with the book of Malachi about 400 BC. For 400 years there was no new word from God in Israel. Then, with the ministry of John the Baptist, God began to speak. John's work was to prepare the way for the Messiah. He preached to Israel, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." The Messiah was about to appear, but the dispensation of the law was still in effect.

THE KINGDOM IS ANNOUNCED TO ISRAEL



When John the Baptist and Jesus Christ appeared, they came to the nation of Israel. Their message: the Messiah and His Kingdom are at hand.

25. Luke 1:26-38 records the announcement by the Angel Gabriel to Mary concerning the birth of Jesus Christ.
(vv. 32-33) What position would Jesus Christ occupy? _____
_____.
26. (Matthew 3:1-3) What message did John the Baptist preach to Israel? (v. 2) _____
_____.
27. (Matthew 4:17) What message did Jesus preach? _____
_____.
28. (John 4:25-26) Who did Jesus claim to be? _____.
29. (Mark 1:14-15) What message did Jesus preach in Galilee? _____
_____.
30. Please carefully read Matthew 26:63-64. _____ (Check)
The high priest in verse 63 asked Jesus if he were the Christ (Messiah) the Son of God.
(v. 64) What answer did Jesus give him? _____

_____.

In the four books, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the dispensation of the law was still in effect. The Messiah appeared and the Messianic Kingdom was announced, however, in these books we see the nation of Israel reject both her Messiah and the Kingdom.

31. Please carefully read Acts 3:12-15. To whom is Peter speaking?
(v. 12) _____.

(vv. 13-15) What had Israel done? _____

_____.

32. (John 1:11) What happened when Christ came unto His own (Israel)? _____

_____.

In the next lessons we will learn about:

5. Dispensation of the Law (continuation);

6. Dispensation of Grace;

7. Dispensation of Divine Government;

8. Dispensation of the Fullness of Times.

MEMORY VERSE FOR LESSON 5 IS ROMANS 15:4

Please use a separate page for Questions or Comments.

Which version(s) of the Bible did you use to complete this Bible lesson:

_____.

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