

END TIMES

(A study given by Pastor Wayne Pratt in Houston from 11/30/06 – 12/3/06)

III. A DISPENSATIONAL VIEW OF THINGS

- A. We can never begin to study end times events without first having a clear understanding of the various dispensations found in Scripture. God's word has divisions (2 Tim. 2:15) and we must study to "*rightly divide*" them. An understanding of these divisions, or "dispensations," will enable us to apply the truths found in them to their proper place. Thereafter, much of the Bible's complexity disappears and many of its alleged contradictions vanish. Many of the different manners, methods, and doctrines in the Bible which often trouble people are then reconciled, and the believer begins to see the "big picture" of God's eternal plan.
- B. Since properly understanding the Bible's divisions is the key to being sound in doctrine and making sense of its differences, failure to do so can lead to dangerous heresies and spiritual chaos. When a person takes a precept or doctrine peculiar to one dispensation and forces it to apply doctrinally to another, he ends up with a heresy every time. He may quote several Bible verses to "prove" his doctrine, but it is still a lie once it is divorced from its corresponding dispensation.
- C. Dispensation defined: A stage in a progressive revelation, expressly adapted to the needs of a particular nation or period of time. It refers to a manner, method, system or particular arrangement of dealing with people God has chosen to dispense during a period of time. The word is translated from the Greek word *oikonomia* = a stewardship [see Luke 16:1-4; Eph. 3:2-6; Col. 1:25], the management or disposition of affairs entrusted to one; administration, economy. In each dispensation, God is *dispensing* something. NOTE: God never changes, i.e., His eternal attributes and characteristics (Mal. 3:6), but the outworking of His plan changes from one dispensation to the next.
- D. Characteristics common to each dispensation
 1. There is a new revelation from God – He is always the initiator. There is a fresh introduction of new principles not before valid [and not previously known or understood]. God invites those concerned to enter into a **covenant** relationship (which usually consists of promises, commandments, responsibilities and warnings of the consequences for failure to keep the covenant)
 2. There is a continuance of certain ordinances already valid before that time
 3. There is an annulment of other regulations valid up until that time
 4. There follows a period of testing which in most cases ends in man's failure to obey
 5. There is typically a judgment after man's failure, marking the end of the dispensation
- E. The clearest example of two distinct dispensations is the division between the Old and New Testaments:
 1. Heb. 1:1-2: "*In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets **at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son.***"
 2. Heb. 7:11-18: "*If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood [Dispensation of Law] (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for **another priest** to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? For when there is a **change of the priesthood**, there must also be a **change of the law**. He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests... **The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless.***"
 3. Heb. 8:7-13: "*For **if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another.** But God found fault with the people and said: 'The time is coming, declares the Lord, when **I will make a new covenant** with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers... **No longer** will a man teach his neighbor,*

*or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord'... **By calling this covenant 'new,' He has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.***"

- F. The Bible speaks of "ages" [Gk. *aion* = "eon"] which are distinguishable periods of time in God's dealing with His creation (Mat. 12:32; 13:39, 40-49; Rom. 16:25; Col. 1:26; Tit. 1:2; Gal. 1:4; 1 Tim. 1:17)
- G. Mysteries hidden in previous dispensations were revealed only in the Dispensation of Grace (Church Age)
 - 1. Eph. 3:9-11: "*And to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which **for ages past was kept hidden** in God, who created all things. **His intent was that NOW, THROUGH THE CHURCH, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known** to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to His eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"
 - 2. Rom. 16:25-26: "*Now to Him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the **revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but NOW revealed and made known** through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey Him.*"
 - 3. NOTE: People in previous dispensations did not need to understand – it would only have confused Jews living under the dispensation of Law to understand that God would one day make Jew and Gentile one in Christ.
- H. Certain Scriptures seem to contradict one another because they belong to different dispensations:
 - 1. Mat. 5:17-18: "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them...*" **VS.** Galatians 2:16: "*Know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.*"
 - 2. Mat. 10:5-6: "*Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel*" **VS.** Mat. 28:19: "*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.*"
- I. **SUMMARY OF THE TEN DISPENSATIONS**
 - 1. **Angelic**
 - 2. **Innocence** (Gen. 1-3)
 - a. Edenic Covenant
 - b. Ended with Adam & Eve's fall & banishment from Eden
 - c. God in His mercy provided a sacrificial covering for their nakedness
 - 3. **Conscience** (Gen. 3-8)
 - a. Adam & Eve "saw" – they now had the knowledge of good and evil; they experienced guilt for the first time
 - b. Adamic Covenant
 - c. Curse of sin and death on all mankind
 - 4. **Civil Government** (Gen. 8-11)
 - a. Noahic Covenant (post-Flood)
 - b. Sign of the rainbow given
 - c. Capital punishment, eating of meat first instituted
 - d. Ended with God's judgment at Babel
 - 5. **Israel under Promise** (Gen. 11:10 - Ex. 18:27)

- a. Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12)
 - (1) God gave unconditional promises to a specific people – the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the children of Israel.
 - (2) For the first time, God selected a specific nation to be His people; in this and the following dispensation, it is important to note that the blessings promised pertained ONLY to the Israelites. Anyone else had to be circumcised and become an Israelite in order to partake of the promises [see Ruth 1:16]. Acts 2:11 speaks of “*Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs.*” Similarly, now in the Dispensation of Grace, the ONLY way to partake of God’s promises is to receive Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12).

- b. Sign of circumcision given

6. Israel under Law (Ex. 19-Acts 1)

- a. Mosaic Covenant:
 - (1) Moral Law - This consisted of the Ten Commandments, etc. (Ex. 20:1-26)
 - (2) Civil [Judicial] Law - This consisted of the precepts of the judicial system for the punishment of crimes and settlement of disputes (Ex. 21:1 - 24:18).
 - (3) Ceremonial Law - This was Israel’s religious system, which included all the details of sacrifice and worship: The Tabernacle, priesthood, offerings, etc. (Ex. 25:1- 40:38, etc.).
- b. Sign of the Sabbath given to Israel
- c. Israel quickly failed, breaking God’s law. However, God patiently bore with their disobedience and unbelief for more than 1,000 years until around 600 B.C. He allowed Nebuchadnezzar to destroy Jerusalem and take the Jews captive to Babylon. During that time, Jeremiah prophesied of a “New Covenant” that God would one day make with His people.
- d. NOTE: Israel’s utter failure to live under the Law is meant to be an historical lesson for all humanity. The Law was never meant to be a means of salvation, but rather to show us how good we would have to be to save ourselves. It points to a better day under the New Covenant of Grace where God will enable the believer to fulfill the requirements of the Law through the power of the indwelling Spirit: “*For what **the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature**, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so He condemned sin in sinful man, **in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us**, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit*” (Rom. 8:3-4).
- e. Israel’s rejection of the promised and long-awaited Messiah caused God to set Israel aside and to **temporarily** suspend or interrupt this dispensation: “*“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, **you will not see Me again until you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord’**”* (Mat. 23:37-39).
- f. It must be emphasized that **God’s rejection of the Jews is temporary, NOT permanent**. Contrary to what some teach, God DID NOT replace Israel with the Church – God’s program with Israel is far from being completed yet. We will see in the Dispensations of the Great Tribulation and the Millennium that Israel will once again take center stage in God’s program. Note just a few of numerous examples:
 - (1) Rev. 7 - 144,000 literal Jews sealed during Tribulation
 - (2) Dan. 9:24-27 - Daniel’s 70th week which concerns Israel to be fulfilled during the Tribulation (Mat. 24:15; 2 Thess. 2:4)

- (3) Jer. 31:35-37 - as long as the sun, moon and stars are shining, God says the children of Israel are still His people!
- (4) Rom. 11:1-2, 11-15, 25-27 - Paul vigorously argues that God never totally rejected His people Israel, but rather they “*experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved.*”

7. Dispensation of Grace: The Church Age (Pentecost to the Rapture)

- a. Technically, this dispensation began on the Day of Pentecost (Peter referred to Pentecost as the “*beginning*” in Acts 11:15) and concludes with the Rapture of the Church. [Note: Christ’s birth, death and resurrection all took place “*under law*” (Gal. 4:4). Jesus lived sinlessly as a Jew under the law (Mat. 5:17) so that He could be a perfect atoning sacrifice.] It is sometimes referred to as “*the last days*” (Acts 2:17; Heb. 1:2). It was actually a mystery that God kept secret throughout the Old Testament and revealed after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Eph. 3:3-9). In some ways this is a parenthetical dispensation because it is in the form of a mystery and is sandwiched between the two Jewish dispensations of Law and the Millennium.
- b. As already discussed in Section III-E on p.1, of all the various dispensations, the most distinguishable differences are seen between the economy of law and grace. This contrast is seen in numerous Scriptures in the New Testament, particularly in the books of Romans, Galatians and Hebrews. In every case, we see that the Dispensation of Grace (and its New Covenant) is far superior to the Dispensation of Law (Old Covenant):
 - (1) John 1:17: “*For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*”
 - (2) Rom. 6:14-15: “*You are not under law, but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!*”
 - (3) Heb. 1:1-2: “*In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son.*”
- c. A New Covenant promising regeneration, justification by faith and most importantly, the **Baptism in the Holy Spirit**, a unique and unprecedented “infilling” in God’s Spirit never before experienced in previous dispensations
- d. The birth of the **Church**
 - (1) The Church was first announced by our Lord Jesus Christ in Mat. 16:18, purchased by the shedding of His blood on Calvary (Acts 20:28; Eph. 5:26-27), and began after His resurrection and ascension at Pentecost when, in accordance with His promise (Acts 1:5), individual believers were for the first time baptized with the Holy Spirit into a unified spiritual organism called the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-13; Col. 2:19).
 - (2) **In this dispensation, God is no longer dealing with men primarily as nations but as individuals.** Each individual can have a personal relationship with God through the Lord Jesus Christ and he does not have to go through any priest or religious system to receive atonement for his sins. Israel, as a nation, has been placed on a “back burner” because of their blindness, but individual Jews can be saved just the same as Gentiles until this dispensation ends. The “Church of God” is a distinct body made up of both Jews and Gentiles and has many blessings which neither group enjoys apart. God has poured many extremely rich blessings upon the saved of this dispensation that He has not given to those of any other. Even those saved in future dispensations do not have many of the precious treasures the Body of Christ has now.
 - (3) **A great mystery unveiled: Gentiles are now fellow-heirs with Jews in one body, the Church.** Jewish believers in the First Century struggled with such a new and foreign concept.

We take these things for granted today, but for centuries, the Jews had been God's chosen people, and NO ONE ELSE! It must have sounded like heresy to them when Paul wrote that God had broken down the barrier between the uncircumcised Gentiles and the Jews, making them fellow citizens in ONE BODY (Eph. 2:11-22; 3:2-6)

- (4) Even the Early Church had difficulty embracing this new revelation. For the first 8 years, there was an essentially Jewish church in Jerusalem, and God had to push them out to share the Gospel with the Samaritans (Acts 8) and the Gentiles (Acts 10)
- e. By 70 A.D., the Jewish temple and the city of Jerusalem were destroyed by the Romans. This brought an end to the Levitical priesthood, sacrifices, etc. The Jews were scattered throughout the earth, awaiting a time after the close of the Dispensation of Grace where God will again turn His attention to Israel (see Section 6-e. on p.3).

f. **The End of the Dispensation: The Rapture**

- (1) This dispensation began in a unique way and so it will end also. It began with an unprecedented "outpouring" or "Baptism" in the Holy Spirit, where the Third Person of the Trinity took up personal residence on earth in believers, making them His temple (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19-20). It will end with the Lord Himself evacuating the Church and closing the era of His Spirit being "*poured out upon all flesh.*"
- (2) Understanding the distinctiveness of God's program for Israel and His program for the Church helps us to clearly see why the Rapture MUST occur before the start of the Tribulation. As studied in Section 7.d.(3) on p.4, it was only in the Dispensation of the Church that God made Jew and Gentile one in the Body of Christ (see Rom. 10:12; Gal. 3:27-28). Prior to that, in the Dispensation of Israel under Law, as well as afterward in the Dispensation of the Tribulation, God deals with Israel as a separate and distinct people. It is obvious, then, that the Church must be removed before God can deal specifically with Israel as defined in Daniel's prophecy (Dan. 9:24-27).
 - (a) From the call of Abraham until the birth of the Church, God divided the human race into **two groups**: Jews and Gentiles.
 - (b) From the birth of the Church until today, God has divided the world into **three groups**: unbelieving Jews, unbelieving Gentiles and the Church: "*Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God*" (1 Cor. 10:32). Therefore, in the present Dispensation of the Church, a believer, whether Jew or Gentile, simply becomes "*the church of God.*"
- (3) In 2 Thess. 2:6-7, Paul refers to a "Restrainer" who continues to hold down or suppress the man of lawlessness (the antichrist) until He (the Restrainer) is taken away or removed: "*And now you know what is holding him [the antichrist] back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the One who now holds it back will continue to do so till He is taken out of the way.*" Obviously, this Restrainer has supernatural power and exerts a worldwide influence. It seems clear that this is the Holy Spirit in the Church (see 1 Cor. 12:12-13; Rev. 22:17) who is taken out of the way at the time of the Rapture. Obviously, the Holy Spirit is omnipresent and cannot literally be "removed" from the earth – He will simply operate in the way He did prior to Pentecost.
- (4) NOTE: We will study more about the Rapture later.

8. **Dispensation of the Tribulation** (Rev. 6-19)

9. **Dispensation of the Millennium** (Rev. 20:1-15)

10. **Dispensation of the Eternal Kingdom** (Rev. 21-22)