

The Dispensations (2)

The First Dispensation – Innocence (Genesis 1.26 - 3.24)

Background: This dispensation begins with the creation of man. Adam was created in innocence; that is, he had not sinned but was capable of sinning.

Stewardship/Responsibility: In this dispensation, man was given the responsibility of being fruitful and ruling God's creation (Genesis 1.28-29, 2.15). A further responsibility was given, namely that man was not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2.17).

Judgment: Man failed God's simple test. As a result of the Fall, divine judgment was passed in the form of spiritual death, being cast out from Eden, pain in child-birth and hard labour to produce the fruit of the land. A great separation took place between God and man. No longer was man favourable towards God, but is now at enmity with Him (Romans 8.7). This is demonstrated by the fact that Adam and Eve hid from God when He entered the garden to talk with them. Mankind disobeyed God and effectively bowed to Satan's word and rule over God's. As a result man was doomed to live in a world dominated by sin and Satan, being used for his selfish purposes.

Revelation: The promise of a coming Redeemer (Genesis 3.15).

The Second Dispensation – Conscience (Genesis 4.1 - 8.19)

Stewardship/Responsibility: Following Adam's sin he acquired the knowledge of good and evil and gained a conscience (Romans 2.15). His responsibility was then to do all known good and live according to his conscience. God no longer spoke directly to man (as in Eden) but spoke through their consciences. God also employed the restraint of the Holy Spirit at this time too as He strived (or 'ruled') with men (Genesis 6.3).

Judgment: Again, man failed the test of obeying God on the basis of conscience and the restraint of the Holy Spirit. Cain murdered his brother (cf. Genesis 4.7-8) and then built a godless civilization characterised by polygamy and violence (Genesis 4.17). His personal judgment is recorded in Genesis 4.11-12. In fact as the dispensation progressed we read of the wickedness of man: *Genesis 6.5: 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.* As a result, God brought divine judgment in the form of the Flood (Genesis 7.21-24).

Revelation: God's revelation was that man could only approach to God by means of a blood sacrifice (Genesis 4.3-7, Hebrews 11.4). *Note. Conscience and the restraint of the Holy Spirit continue as a 'ruling factor' used by God to govern man today (Romans 2.14-15, 2 Thessalonians 2.7).*

The Third Dispensation – Human Government (Genesis 8.20 - 11.32)

Background: Government is the organisation of society. It has the ability to restrain people by punishing crimes (Romans 13.1-7). The source of human corruption prior to the flood was the murder of Abel and the continued existence of Cain. As a result God determined that He would never again allow murderers to infect the rest of humanity (Genesis 9.5-6).

Stewardship/Responsibility: The responsibilities of man under this dispensation are indicated in Genesis 9.1-7. Mankind was to be fruitful, multiply and replenish the earth. In addition, the principle of government was introduced: *Genesis 9.6: Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man.* God now holds men responsible for governing other men as well as being personally responsible to God under conscience.

Judgment: Mankind failed under conscience, the restraint of the Holy Spirit and human government. For example, God's instruction to replenish and spread out in the earth (Genesis 11.4) was disobeyed. The Tower of Babel was the result and God's judgment was to confound mankind's speech (Genesis 11.5-7) and scatter civilisation (Genesis 11.8-9).

Revelation: Human government failed, but a future Ruler is coming who will reign in perfect peace and righteousness (Isaiah 9.6-7). *Note. Human government continues as a 'ruling factor' today (Romans 13.1-7).*

The Fourth Dispensation – Promise (Genesis 12 - Exodus 18)

Background: God gave promises to Abraham and his descendants such as: blessing him, making his name great, giving him many descendants, giving him the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession etc. (Genesis 12.2-3, 13.14-17, 17.1-22, 22.16-18). God also gave national promises concerning Israel: He would bring Israel into existence as a nation and make it great, give Israel the land of Canaan forever etc.

Stewardship/Responsibility: The responsibility of Abraham and his descendants during this dispensation was to obey God on the basis of human conscience, the restraint of the Holy Spirit, human government and promise. God intended His promises to make a difference to the way Abraham and his descendants lived (cf. Genesis 17.1, Hebrews 11.13-16).

Judgment: Again, man failed. Abraham did not heed God's promises and took matters into his own hands fathering Ishmael through Hagar and causing problems between his descendants and those of Ishmael to this day. God's people ended up in Egypt in slavery.

Revelation: During this dispensation, God also gave a universal promise: *Genesis 22:18: And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.* That is, a Redeemer would come into the world through Abraham's line of descent.

The Fifth Dispensation – Law (Exodus 19 - The Death of Christ)

Background: This fifth dispensation had five 'ruling factors', the Law in addition to the previous four. The Law acted as a 'tutor' or 'instructor' to turn God's people to Christ (Galatians 3.23-25). It would teach God's people how to live according to His mind and will. However, it could never justify, only condemn (Galatians 2.16). The purpose of the Law was to demonstrate the sinfulness of mankind (Romans 3.19) and make the need for Christ evident. The tearing of the veil in the Temple at Jerusalem indicated that the Law was terminated at that time (Mark 15.38, Romans 10.4).

Stewardship/Responsibility: Mankind accepted responsibility of the Mosaic Law and all of its 613 commandments governing the moral, civil and ceremonial aspects of Israel's life. *Exodus 19.8: And all the people answered together, and said, All that the LORD hath spoken we will do. And Moses returned the words of the people unto the LORD.*

Judgment: God's people constantly failed the test. They broke the Mosaic Law repeatedly (Jeremiah 31.32, Ezekiel 16) and God told them they had a heart of stone (Zechariah 7.12). This indicated that they had made their hearts obstinate (adamant, inflexible) and set their minds and wills against God's Law. As a result God's people suffered exile to Assyria and Babylon. The nation was also dispersed as a result of their rejection of Christ.

Revelation: *Exodus 34.6-7: And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty.*

The Sixth Dispensation – Grace, or The Church (Death of Christ – Rapture)

Background: One could argue: "How could man be expected to obey all these rules?" Maybe mankind needed something simpler; a *relationship* instead of *rules*. Grace did not begin in the NT, but also operated during OT times, for example, Israel was restored from the Babylonian captivity by grace (Ezra 9.8). However, grace began to function in a new way during NT times: *John 1.17: For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.* Christ taught people what it was to live by grace. *Note. Romans 6.14: For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace. Here the word 'under' implies being under rule. There are again five 'ruling factors' during this dispensation, Law being replaced by grace.*

Stewardship/Responsibility: "Under Grace the responsibility on man is to accept the gift of righteousness that God freely offers to all" **CC Ryrie**. Another function of the rule of grace is also to guide believers to live practically righteous lives. *Titus 2.11-12: For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching (practice discipline, give guidance) us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world (age).* So, grace teaches us to live godly lives.

Judgment: Mankind fails the test. The majority fail to accept God's gift of righteousness by faith and God breaks out in judgment. Towards the end of the dispensation the restraint of the Holy Spirit is removed (2 Thessalonians 2.7-8) and God will pour out divine judgment on the world during the Tribulation (Revelation 6-19).

Revelation: Both Jews and Gentiles may be part of one body and receive the gift of righteousness through faith in Christ (Ephesians 2.14-16, Philippians 3.9).

The Seventh Dispensation – The Millennial Kingdom (Second Advent – End of Time)

Background: There are three 'ruling factors' during this dispensation; conscience, human government and the rule of Christ. The promises will be fulfilled during this dispensation and thus cease to be promises. Grace will not function as a 'ruling factor' as any who rebel against Christ's rule will be executed (Isaiah 11.3-4, 29.20-21). In this dispensation the righteous, just rule of Christ will be enforced worldwide and He will govern in peace over the whole earth (Isaiah 11.1-5, Zechariah 14.9-10). People on earth will experience many blessings such as abundant food (Psalms 72.16), the abolition of war (Isaiah 2.4) and longevity of life (Isaiah 65.20-22).

Stewardship/Responsibility: Man's responsibility will be to submit to the righteous rule of Christ. Satan will not be allowed to instigate any activity on earth. His lot will be the bottomless pit (Revelation 20.1-3).

Judgment: Man will fail the final test. Some will outwardly rebel against Christ during His reign (Isaiah 11.3-4, 29.20-21). Others will not rebel outwardly until the final uprising led by Satan (Revelation 20.7-10). All of the dispensations have demonstrated that man's failure is down to nothing but his own inward, sinful nature.

(The Dispensations)

“A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in God’s master plan whereby God tests mankind.”

