

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 12 August 2001

No. T0175

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The Bible Today: The Dispensations

Introduction.

"Kids! Who'd have 'em!" was a saying often heard in my home city of Bath when I was younger. Having been a father to three children, I was known to have said the words myself on more than a few occasions. But, overall, children are a blessing from the Lord. As Christians, we are privileged to bring them up under His nurture and admonition. However, if you are a parent, you will know that you deal with an utterly dependent baby in a completely different way to the curious toddler. Then, again, you treat your adventurous infants in a different way to your confident juniors. Finally, you manage your rebellious teenagers in a different way to those who have reached adulthood and maturity. The arrangements that we make for our youngsters to bring them up in a right way vary with the stage of development at which we find them. That is exactly what we mean by "dispensations" in relation to the Scriptures.

Over the history of this world, God has made different arrangements with various people in seeking their blessing. As in dealing with children, some principles remain the same over time while others change. It is the same with the dispensations where God deals in a particular way with this world. Some of them go on, others overlap and some have only lasted for a specific time. It is worthwhile noting that while God's ways may change, His essential being does not. He remains both light and love eternally. Therefore, in this talk we are using the word "dispensations" to indicate God's administrative dealings with Man over time.

The Centre-Piece of God's total plan of redemption for mankind is one. It is based on the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are privileged to look back to the cross. Having the New Testament scriptures, we are able to understand the value and effect of that great sacrifice. We note the cross in the emblems of bread and wine, and in baptism, in particular. However, in Old Testament times, men and women were able to look forward to the cross through figures that God presented to them. So through the years, God's methods of dealing with Man concerning his sin may have varied - but He always had the cross of Christ in mind. As we examine the dispensations, we must always have that sacrifice before us.

Broadly speaking **the divine covenants** that God made with mankind highlighted the main arrangements or dispensations of God. In Scripture, the word "covenant" refers to, not only, an agreement or a contract which may be between different people, or between God and man, but also to an arrangement which is unconditional - that is to say, God sometimes undertakes to fulfill the arrangement without any expected action from people. Each one of God's covenants has its own distinct emphasis.

Seven main dispensations may be identified throughout scripture. Each one has one, or even two, covenants linked with it.

1. **The Dispensation of Innocence** relates to the original covenant of God in Eden.
2. **The Dispensation of Conscience** links with that arrangement God made with Adam after he had sinned.
3. **The Dispensation of Human Government** that embraces the basic rule of government given by God to Noah.
4. **The Dispensation of Promise** that is geared to God's promises to Abraham and also includes those made to David.
5. **The Dispensation of Law** that began with God's law being given to Moses and includes the conditional promises made by God concerning the land of Canaan.
6. **The Dispensation of Grace** that embraces the Church Age under the promise of Christ Himself.
7. **The Dispensation of the Kingdom** that is paralleled by both the New Covenant and the Everlasting Covenant that seems to encompass all the other covenants having been God's purpose before the worlds existed.

1. The Dispensation of Innocence links with the Edenic Covenant.

The details of this arrangement are recorded from Genesis 1:26 to 2:25. Man was created in the image and likeness of God. Being in the image of God shows that he was God's representative on this planet. Being in the likeness of God shows that he was similar to God. For example, as God is three in One, so a man has spirit, soul and body - three, yet one. As God has emotions, so a man has emotions and so on. Yet, one major difference was that Man

was in a state of innocence, knowing neither good nor evil. He was put on this earth in order to have the rule over it. He was placed in the Garden of Eden (or the "Garden of Delight") to dress it.

He had received one commandment from God that put him under a period of probation, namely, Adam was not to partake of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, lest he should come under the penalty of death. Later, Eve, deceived by the Serpent (the devil) disobeyed God's command. Adam, the first man, also took and ate of that fruit. Unlike Eve, he was not deceived (1 Timothy 2:14). His was blatant disobedience. So Adam, the leader of the human race, brought himself, with the whole of mankind, under subjection to Satan, sin, and death. Adam and Eve now knew good and evil; but had not the power to do good or to refuse evil. Thus, sin broke this arrangement and excluded them from its benefits. They were expelled from the garden in case they should partake of the Tree of Life in his sinful condition. The Tree of Life was forfeited because of Adam's disobedience. This tree is typical of the Lord Jesus as the Life-giver (Revelation 2:7 and 22:14).

Interestingly, one of the main purposes of God is revealed when a deep sleep fell upon Adam (before he had sinned) and God, taking one of his ribs built "Woman" from it. She was to be a help suitable for Adam - a wife. So Christ, who is called "the last Adam", died on Calvary's cross in order that the church, His own bride, could be built (Matthew 16:18 and Ephesians 5:22-33). The Son of God is now the leader of a new race of people - even all those who have been born again.

2. The Dispensation of Conscience is linked with the Adamic Covenant.

The latter included the arrangement between God and Man that was characterised by man's awakened conscience after falling into sin by eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The details of this arrangement are recorded in Genesis chapters 3-7 and Romans chapters 1 and 7. Conscience is that within a person that enables him or her to distinguish between good and evil. As mankind came under the arrangement of conscience, God then dealt with man through his conscience (Romans 2:14-15).

God provided Adam and Eve with coats of skins to hide their nakedness. It indicates that if there was to be an atonement or covering for sin, then blood had to be shed. The innocent died for the guilty. It foreshadowed the plan of redemption and the shed blood of the Lamb of God - for without the shedding of blood there is no putting away of sin.

At the same time, God indicated to Adam that He would arrange the defeat of Satan. In Genesis 3:15 we read of the seed of the woman having his heel bruised while the Serpent has his head crushed. The seed of the woman is Christ. Through His cross, the Lord Jesus has dealt a destructive blow to Satan. Christ has already spoiled the "strong man" (Matthew 12:29). Through death, Christ has destroyed him who had the power of death, that is, the devil and has delivered those, who through fear of death, were all their lifetime subject to bondage (Hebrews 2:14-15).

Though the conscience of Man originally defined good and evil, he soon found he could not overcome evil. He was a slave to sin. Therefore, by itself, the dispensation of conscience proved to be inadequate because of man's failure. Over time mankind became more and more corrupt and violent. This resulted in God's judgment of the world by a universal flood in Noah's day. Unfortunately, people today have become quite blasé about the standards of holiness that God sets, so-much-so, that conscience is now unreliable as a discernor of that which is good and evil. Much that is evil in God's sight is now defined as *good* or *acceptable* by mankind.

3. The Dispensation of Human Government

The Dispensation of Human Government begins in Genesis 9 where we have the first specific mention of the word "covenant." This covenant was made with Noah and every living creature after the flood. It is an unconditional covenant. The token of the covenant with Noah was the rainbow. It is the symbol of God's mercy. By it we know that God will never again destroy the earth with a universal flood. Those interested in global warming may be assured by this. Yet that mercy was also shown by the burnt offerings offered by Noah upon leaving the ark. Throughout scripture, the burnt offering is symbolic of the tremendous value and perfection that God sees in the death of Christ.

In God's arrangement with Noah man was entrusted with governmental authority. The details of this covenant are recorded in Genesis 8:9. After the flood, God placed in the hands of man the legal authority to execute murderers. This being the highest function of government implies every lesser function. Of course, many today argue against the issue of capital punishment. They argue that if life is God-given then why would He ask men in government to execute murderers? The reason is that Man is made in the image and likeness of God. When another person commits murder it is a personal affront to God Himself. The life of that man becomes forfeited because he shows that he has no wish to comply with God's purpose - in fact, instead of representing God here on earth, the murderer shows he is absolutely opposed to God's purposes. It is the highest act of rebellion.

Romans 13 shows how the powers that be are ordained of God and that the administrators of power, whether they are believers or unbelievers, are counted as servants of God. Like it or not, they are God's representatives. They are responsible to deal with evil and execute fair judgment. Many people believe that innocent people have been put to death in the past, therefore there should be no death penalty. This may have been the case, but the fault does not lie with the sentence itself. It lies with the witnesses that brought such a person to judgment. The Bible insists that all things are established out of the mouths of two or three witnesses. If there is any doubt, then the death sentence should not be passed.

Human government has proved itself throughout history to be poor in producing divine order. This was proven decisively in the necessity of God's judgment at the tower of Babel (Genesis 10:11). Yet without government there would be complete lawlessness as indicated by recent riots.

4. The Dispensation of Promise is linked with the Abrahamic Covenant.

The latter included the arrangement between God and man characterized by man receiving promises from God. The major promise was that of salvation through Christ, the seed of Abraham (Matthew 1:1; Galatians 3:16). It was to be through Christ (the chosen One) that all the nations would be blessed. You can read the details of this arrangement in Genesis chapters 12-50. God made promises to Abraham and confirmed them to Isaac and Jacob. Their relationship to God was centered around these promises. These promises, involving the seed and the land, included temporal, national and spiritual blessings. They received the fulfillment of some of the promises in their day, but they died in faith, not having received certain other promises which were to be fulfilled under other arrangements (see, Hebrews 11:8-21, 33). This arrangement of promises was, and still is, centered in the only begotten Son of God.

Again, blood shedding accompanied the promises (Genesis 15) where five sacrifices are mentioned. God passed between the pieces of those sacrifices as He made these promises to Abraham.

The Seal of the Covenant, circumcision, is found in Genesis 17. It is called the seal of the covenant in Romans 4:11 and Acts 7:8). Normally, it is symbolic of self-judgment in the New Testament. However, in Colossians 2:11 it is seen as the old sinful nature being judged in the death of Christ.

In the opening verses of Matthew's Gospel, we find the Son of Abraham and the Son of David linked together in Jesus Christ. Therefore, the covenant which God made with David may be included in that made with Abraham. The Davidic Covenant is found in 2 Samuel 7: 4-29 and Psalm 89. The main promise of the covenant was that the seed of David, Christ, would take the throne of David and rule and reign upon it as a righteous king forever. Dozens of Old Testament Scriptures tell us this.

As in all previous covenants, sacrificial blood was shed, as David offered sacrifices to the Lord at the return of the Ark of the Covenant. Psalm 89:27-37 show that God promised David that as long as the sun and the moon existed, the seed of David would sit upon his throne. This prophecy will be fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords. He will be the ruler of this world who will one day hand a purged earth back to God the Father that God may be all in all.

5. The Dispensation of Law is linked with the Mosaic Covenant.

This was a covenant that was characterized by man coming under the law of God. The details of this arrangement are recorded mainly in Exodus chapters 19-40. In fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the children of Israel had become a great nation in Egypt, and had been delivered from it to possess the Promised Land. At Mount Sinai God brought the nation under moral, civil and ceremonial law. The ceremonial law included the Tabernacle, Priesthood, Sacrifices, Feasts and Sabbaths. However, the law arrangement also proved inadequate to accomplish the full purpose of God. Israel had declared, "All that the Lord says, we will do." However, they found it impossible to keep God's law. This was proved to be true when those who were under the law rejected and crucified the Messiah who was the fulfillment of that very law. While Christ fulfilled this law, the righteousness of that law finds its fulfillment in those who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit (Romans 8:1-4).

Exodus 24:3-8 and Hebrews 9:18-20 tell us that the Mosaic Covenant was established upon sacrificial blood. It was called the blood of the covenant, and it was sprinkled on the people and the book of the covenant. It reminds us of the sacrifice of Christ being able to meet all of God's demands regarding holiness.

The covenant was marked with the emphasis on the Sabbath Day (Exodus 31:12-18). It points to the true Sabbath rest which would be found in Christ (Hebrews chapters 3 and 4).

Integrated with the Mosaic Law is what is called, the Palestinian Covenant. (Deuteronomy 29:1) Its promises concerned the blessings and/or cursings upon Palestine, the Promised Land. Israel's dwelling in the land was to be

conditional. If they did not obey God, they would be expelled (Leviticus 26). In the day that a new generation of Israel entered Canaan, we find an altar of stones built and offerings made. Every covenant reminds us of the importance of a life forfeited - of bloodshed (Deuteronomy 27:1-8).

6. The Dispensation of Grace is linked with the Church Age and the New Covenant.

Strictly speaking, the New Covenant was specifically made with Israel. One day, they will have God's Law written in their hearts. The nation will be reborn spiritually and Jerusalem will become the metropolis of the Earth. However, the church or "assembly of called out ones" already comes under many of the blessings of the New Covenant - but it is distinct! Jesus said, "I will build my church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18). All Christians are included in this chapter. Each has CHRIST, not the Law, written upon their hearts. He is everything to them and to God. Whereas, the New Covenant may be included with the blessing in the kingdom that follows this section, the Church Age is very distinct. It is the period of God dealing most graciously with people and which has its beginning when the Church was formed at Pentecost. We might say that the token of this arrangement is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Every believer in Christ receives the Holy Spirit as the seal of God (Ephesians 1:13-14; 4:30).

Just as the precious blood of Jesus is the blood of the New Covenant (Revelation 12:11; Hebrews 9), so it is the ground of this age of grace. In fact, one acrostic of GRACE is God's Redemption At Christ's Expense. All previous sacrificial blood pointed to His blood. Blood which is also that of the Everlasting Covenant (Hebrews 13:20). It is the blood of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (1 Peter 1:19 and 20). It is the blood of God's own Son (Acts 20:28). The Church Age ends when the Lord Himself comes to take all believers to be with Himself (1 Thessalonians 4; 1 Corinthians 15; and John 14)

7. The Dispensation of the Kingdom is linked with the New Covenant and the Everlasting Covenant (Hebrews 13:20 and 21).

Whereas, the New Covenant related specifically to Israel during this Kingdom period of one thousand years, the Everlasting Covenant broadens out to include the Gentiles. There has never been a time when the kingdom of God itself has not been in existence. The psalmist proclaims in Psalm 145:13, "Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and thy dominion endureth throughout all generations." This is true because the King Himself is "eternal, immortal, invisible" (1 Timothy 1:17).

This covenant was made according to God's eternal purpose which He purposed in Christ before the world began (Ephesians 1:4, 2:10; 3:11; John 17:5). The blood of this covenant is seen in the fact that the Lamb of God was slain from the foundation of the world (Hebrews 13:20 and 21; Acts 20:28) and is marked by the gift of "eternal life which God promised before the world began" (Titus 1:2 with 2 Timothy 1:9).

The dispensation of the Everlasting Covenant is actually the beginning and the consummation of all the other arrangements of God. In it, God will display the wonder of His Son to this world and by it He will introduce the eternal order found in Revelation chapters 20 to 22 where we find the millennial and eternal states. There we find the heavenly bride of Christ, the Church, will be seen eternally in the presence of Christ, her Bridegroom. He will have a precious companion. Praise be to God!

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