

The Dispensations

by Lewis Sperry Chafer

The Bible is divided into seven major dispensations, each with its own unique characteristics and divine purposes.

Scripture: Genesis 7:23

Topics: "Biblical Dispensations", "Church Age"

Description

Lewis Sperry Chafer delves into the concept of dispensations in the Bible, emphasizing the importance of recognizing these well-defined periods in understanding God's divine purposes throughout history. Each dispensation begins with man in a new position of privilege and responsibility, but ultimately ends in man's failure and God's righteous judgments. Chafer highlights the distinction between primary and secondary applications of Scripture, emphasizing the need for believers to discern which instructions directly apply to them in their walk with God. He also discusses the significance of the dispensation of the Church, which began with Christ's death and Pentecost, and the future dispensation of the Kingdom when Christ will reign on earth.

Transcript

As to time, the Bible may be apportioned into well-defined periods. These periods are clearly separated and the recognition of their divisions with their divine purposes constitutes one of the important factors in true interpretation of the Scriptures. These divisions of time are termed dispensations, which word is somewhat different than the word age in that the word age is more general, being used of any brief division of time or generation of men, though the word age is rightly used as synonymous with the word dispensation.

It is probable that the recognition of the dispensations sheds more light on the whole message of the Scriptures than any other aspect of Bible study. Often the first clear understanding of the dispensations and God's revealed purposes in them results in the beginning of useful Bible knowledge and in the fostering of a personal interest in the Bible itself. Man's relation to God is not the same in every age. It has been necessary to bring fallen man into divine testing. This, in part, is God's purpose in the ages, and the result of the testings is in every case an unquestionable demonstration of the utter failure and sinfulness of man. In the end, every mouth will have been stopped because every assumption of the human heart will have proven its unwisdom and wickedness by centuries of experience.

Each dispensation, therefore, begins with man divinely placed in a new position of privilege and responsibility, and closes with the failure of man resulting in righteous judgments from God. While there are certain abiding facts such as the holy character of God which are of necessity the same in every age, there are varying instructions and responsibilities which are, as to their application, limited to a given period.

In this connection, the Bible student must recognize the difference between a primary and a secondary application of the Word of God. Only those portions of the Scriptures which are directly addressed to the child of God under grace are to be given a personal or primary application. All such instructions he is expected to perform in detail. In the matter of a secondary application it should be observed that, while there are spiritual lessons to be drawn from every portion of the Bible, it does not follow that the Christian is appointed by God to conform to those governing principles which were the will of God for people of other dispensations. The child of God under grace is not situated as was Adam, or Abraham, or the Israelites when under the Law; nor is he called upon to follow that peculiar manner of life which according to the Scriptures will be required of men when the King shall have returned and set up His kingdom on the earth.

Since the child of God depends wholly on the instructions contained in the Bible for his direction in daily life, and since the principles obtaining in the various dispensations are so diverse, and at times even contradictory, it is important that he shall recognize those portions of the Scriptures which directly apply to him if he is to realize the will of God and the glory of God. In considering the whole testimony of the Bible it is almost as important for the believer who would do the will of God to recognize that which does not concern him as it is for him to recognize that which does concern him. It is obvious that, apart from the knowledge of dispensational truth, the believer will not be intelligently adjusted to the present purpose and will of God in the world. Such knowledge alone will save him from assuming the hopeless legality of the dispensation that is past or from undertaking the impossible world-transforming program belonging to the dispensation which is to come.

Because of imperfect translations, some important truth is hidden to the one who reads only the English text of the Bible. This is illustrated by the fact that the Greek word *aion*, which means an age, or dispensation, is forty times translated by the English word *world*. Thus when it is stated in Mat 13:49, "So shall it be in the end of the world," there is reference not to the end of the material earth, which in due time must come (2Pe 3:7; Rev 20:11; Isa 66:22), but rather to the end of this age. The end of the world is not drawing near, but the end of the age is. According to the Scriptures there are in all seven major dispensations and it is evident that we are now living in the extreme end of the sixth. The kingdom age of a thousand years (Rev 20:4, Rev 20:6) is yet to come.

A dispensation is more or less marked off by the new divine appointment and responsibilities with which it begins and by the divine judgments with which it ends. The seven dispensations are:

1. The Dispensation of Innocence.

The duration of this period is unrevealed. It began with the creation of man, was characterized by those conditions which obtained in the time of man's innocence, it includes the sin of man and ends with a divine judgment by which man received a sentence from God and was expelled from Eden (Gen 1:28 to 3:22).

2. The Dispensation of Conscience.

Possessed with the knowledge of both good and evil, man, for about eighteen hundred years, was required to act according to his own conscience -- choosing the good and rejecting the evil. His failure is recorded in the history of that period. In this time man became so wicked that the age was closed with the judgment of the flood (Gen 3:22 to 7:23).

3. The Dispensation of Human Government.

Continuing more than four hundred years, the history of this dispensation records that man was given the new responsibility of government in the earth with the power of taking human life (Gen 9:1-8), which power has never been withdrawn. Man's failure to govern for God and his success in governing for himself is seen in the ungodly assumptions with which the age ended. The divine judgment on this age was the confusion of tongues (Gen 8:20 to 11:9).

4. The Dispensation of Promise.

In this period of more than four hundred years, extending from the call of Abraham to the giving of the law at Sinai, the new nation which began with Abraham is alone in view. By the terms of this dispensation they are under the gracious promise and covenants of Jehovah with varied instructions as to their relation to God, to the land of promise, and as to their walk before God. The period ends with that people in bondage in Egypt from which they are delivered by the mighty hand of God (Gen 12:1 to Exod. 19:8).

5. The Dispensation of the Law.

This lengthened period began with Israel's assumption of the law at Mount Sinai (Exo 19:8), was characterized by fifteen hundred years of unfaithfulness and broken law, and terminates with the Great Tribulation in the earth. Its course was interrupted by the death of Christ and the thrusting in of the hitherto unannounced age of the church. Thus the church age, while complete in itself, is parenthetical within the age of the law. At the removal of the Church when the Lord comes again to receive His own, the law age will be resumed and continue for that period known as Daniel's seventieth week (Dan 9:24-27) -- which week is generally conceded to be Seven years.* Israel's judgments began with her dispersions, were continued in the destruction of Jerusalem and her final scattering among the Gentiles, and will end with that hour of her greatest afflictions in the coming tribulation. The greatest of her sins is the rejection of her Messiah at the first advent of Christ.

* (In determining the dispensation to which the Tribulation period belongs, it should be observed that it bears no relation to the features of this church age, nor has it the characteristics of a dispensation in itself. Though it is the consummation of divine judgment upon all men and their institutions, it is especially Israelitish. The continuity of that Jewish age which began at Sinai is incomplete apart from the events which belong to the Great Tribulation. As stated by Daniel, the seventieth week is required for the finishing of Israel's transgression and the bringing in of everlasting righteousness (Dan 9:24-27). The transgression to be "finished" could be no part of this age of grace, but is rather of the preceding age. The fact that the general features which obtain in the Tribulation are similar to those principles which were peculiar to the law age is also conclusive. The sabbath is re-established (Mat 24:20), the temple worship is renewed -- though in unbelief -- (Mat 24:15; 2Th 2:4), the Old Testament kingdom-hope will again be announced (Mat 24:14), and the legal principle of merit and reward for endurance will again obtain throughout that brief period (Mat 24:13). Not only does the law dispensation require the yet future Tribulation period for the execution of those divine judgements which belong to it, but, by the recognition of the sequence connecting these two periods of time, the continuity of purpose is preserved wherein the Messianic,

earthly kingdom, which follows the Tribulation, is seen to be both the legitimate expectation and the logical consummation of the dispensation of the law. By so much it may be observed that the present unforeseen dispensation of grace is wholly parenthetical within the dispensation of the law.)

6. The Dispensation of the Church.

Beginning with the death of Christ and the day of Pentecost, a new responsibility is imposed on all men -- both Jews and Gentiles. This responsibility is personal and calls for the acceptance by each individual of the grace of God toward sinners as it has been provided in Christ, with good works as the fruit of salvation. While the primary purpose of God in this dispensation will be perfectly accomplished in the gathering out of the Church, the course and end of this age is characterized by an apostate church and a Christ rejecting world. The judgment will be personal as has been the responsibility. The dispensation of the Church continues from the cross of Christ and the advent of the Spirit to Christ's coming again to receive His own.

7. The Dispensation of the Kingdom.

As predicted in all the Scriptures, Christ will return to this earth and reign sitting on the throne of David. In that time Israel's covenants will be fulfilled and her earthly blessings will overflow. However, the age ends with a revolt against God and the judgment of fire from heaven (Rev 20:7-9). The duration of this dispensation is clearly declared to be a thousand years (Rev 20:4, Rev 20:6), or from the second coming of Christ to the new heaven and the new earth.

As there was a dateless period before the creation of man in which there was both heaven and earth, so there will be a new heaven and a new earth after all dispensations have ceased.

QUESTIONS

1. According to the Scriptures into how many major divisions is time divided?
2. Define the meaning of the words dispensation and age.
3. What is the value of dispensational distinctions in Bible interpretation?
4. What is the divine purpose in the dispensation?
5. How is the beginning and the end of each dispensation indicated?
6. What is the primary and what is a secondary application of Scripture?
7. What relation does the believer sustain to the age of the law and its governing principles?
8. What lessons may be drawn from portions of the Bible which are subject to a secondary application?
9. Are we drawing near the end of the world?
10. Describe the first four dispensations.
11. a. Into what two portions of time is the age of the law dispensation divided?

b. What evidence is there that the period of the Great Tribulation is the continuance and completion of the age of the law?

12. What is the primary divine purpose in the dispensation of the church?

13. a. What will characterize its ending?

b. Are its judgments national, or personal?

14. Describe the age of the kingdom.

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