

# **The Doctrine of Dispensations**

## **What are Dispensations?**

“Dispensation” is a theological term that refers to distinct periods in human history concerning divine revelation. Augustine (354–430) once remarked, “Distinguish the ages, and the Scriptures harmonize.” In other words, understanding the doctrine of dispensations makes much of what appears contradictory in Scripture suddenly align and become clear.

Some argue that this is a new doctrine initially expressed by the Catholic priest Manuel de Lacunza y Diaz (1731-1801), which John Darby expanded upon. C.I. Scofield further developed it, followed by Louis Sperry Chafer of Dallas Seminary. However, as Augustine's quote suggests, this concept was not unfamiliar to him over a thousand years before any of them.

The concept of dispensations is simply that God has divided human history into identifiable periods, often called “ages.” These periods may differ in length, but what distinguishes them is not their duration but how God interacts with humanity during each one.

The dispensations represent the gradual and interconnected revelation of God's interactions with humanity. At times, this includes all of mankind, while at other times, it specifically pertains to certain groups, such as Israel or the Church.

These different dispensations do not represent separate means of salvation. During each, humanity is reconciled to God in only one way: by faith through God's grace, and the work of Christ on the Cross. Before the Cross, people were saved by anticipating the Messiah's forthcoming atoning sacrifice, believing in the revelation given to them up to that time. After the Cross, people are saved through belief in the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom revelation and redemption are fulfilled. A simplified way to understand this is: “Old Testament believers looked forward to their limited understanding of the future Cross, while New Testament believers look back on the reality of the Cross.”

While divine revelation unfolds gradually over time, the truths from earlier periods are not discarded but rather built upon. As a result, truth does not change but accumulates. Our knowledge and understanding of God's divine plan for humanity expand with the ages as God reveals more details of His purpose. This process is known as "progressive revelation," where new insights given in successive dispensations build on those provided in earlier ones. In each dispensation, God teaches humanity something important about Himself and our nature. Consequently, God's plan for humankind is progressively disclosed through these dispensations.

You might reject the term "dispensations," but even a casual student of biblical chronology can notice the presence of these "eras" or "ages," along with the fact that God interacts with humanity differently during each period. The Greek word that gives us "dispensations" is *oikonomia*.

**Ephesians 1:9** having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, <sup>10</sup> that in the **dispensation** of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him. (emphasis added)

**Ephesians 3:1** For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— <sup>2</sup> assuming that you have heard of the **stewardship** of God's grace that was given to me for you, <sup>3</sup> how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. <sup>4</sup> When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, <sup>5</sup> which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. (emphasis added)

*Oikonomia* refers to managing a household or household affairs and is sometimes translated as "stewardship," "fullness of time," or simply "time." We get our English word "economy" from *oikonomia*.

It's challenging to consider dispensations without also considering time. For example, the history of the United States is divided by administrations. We refer to the Biden administration or the Trump administration, indicating

how the government functioned under those presidents. In a sense, dispensations can be likened to an administration.

Each dispensation aims to establish a specific rule of conduct or administration for humanity, yet in every dispensation, humanity fails. We will delve deeper into this in our study.

God often deals differently with man during different periods of history. For example:

- Leviticus 11 designates certain foods as unclean, but in Mark 1:19, Jesus declares all foods clean.
- In Ezra 10:3, the Jews were instructed to separate from their foreign wives and children; however, in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16, believers are counseled against taking such action.
- According to the law, only the high priest could enter the presence of God, referred to as the Holy of Holies in the Temple (Heb. 9:7). However, during the Church Age under grace, all believers have access to the Most Holy Place (Heb. 10:19-22).
- Animal sacrifices were required to represent the Cross during the Age of Israel; however, they are not necessary in the Church Age.

These are not contradictions; rather, they serve as evidence that God has varying expectations during different dispensations. These examples clearly illustrate a shift in dispensations and the ways in which God interacts with humanity.

## **The Dispensations**

While not all pastor-teachers agree on the number of dispensations, most accept that there are seven. Since seven holds significance in Scripture, symbolizing completeness or perfection, it is likely the correct number. The following is the most common list of dispensations:

1. The Age of Innocence (Gen. 1:28): From Adam's creation to his fall.
2. The Age of Conscience, or moral responsibility (Gen. 3:7), spans from the Fall until the flood's conclusion.
3. The Age of Human Government (Gen. 8:15-19) spans from the conclusion of the Flood to the calling of Abram.

4. The Age of Promise (Gen 12:1) extends from the calling of Abram to the giving of the law.
5. The Age of Law, or the Age of Israel (Exodus 19:1), spans the period from the Giving of the Law to the Day of Pentecost in AD 30. It is then interrupted by the Dispensation of the Church, which concludes with the Rapture of the Church. The Age of the Law then continues with the Tribulation, culminating in the Second Advent.
6. The Church Age (Acts 2:1) spans from Pentecost in AD 30 to the Rapture and is inserted at the end of the Age of Israel as a distinct dispensation.
7. Kingdom Age (Rev. 20:4): The thousand-year reign of Christ on Earth, referred to as the Millennium by Christians.

As Augustine said, "Distinguish the ages, and the scriptures harmonize." This makes dispensations an important doctrine to understand, and consequently, Satan must vigorously attack it. The issue with dispensations is that they often challenge sacred theological beliefs, especially when the theology pertains to eschatology (the study of future events).

Any serious study of this doctrine must be based on the Bible, which raises the question: Can it be supported by Scripture? I argue that it is firmly backed by Scripture.

## **Biblical Support for the Doctrine of Dispensations**

We have already examined two references to dispensations in Ephesians. Here is another from 2 Timothy.

**2 Timothy 2:15** Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

The Greek word "*orthotome*," meaning to cut straight, translates as "rightly dividing." Paul is saying the Word of Truth can be divided accurately. In the present tense, this implies that it should be an ongoing action—continuously dividing accurately. This key passage alludes to the doctrine of dispensations.

**Matthew 12:32** Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in **this age** or in the **age to come**. (emphasis added)

The word translated as "age" is the Greek word *aeon*, which denotes a period of time—a literal span of time. This word is also translated as system, period, era, or even eternity, and in this verse, it refers to two distinct dispensations. Since Jesus was speaking to Jews during the Age of Israel, the phrase "this age" refers to the Age of Israel (the 5th dispensation). The dispensation called the "age to come" relates to the forthcoming Church Age, the 6th dispensation.

**Matthew 24:3** Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what *will be* the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the **age**?" (emphasis added)

Jesus has just revealed to his disciples the coming destruction of the Temple. They ask when this will occur, referring to it as "the end of the age." They understand that the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem is connected to His return and the establishment of the Kingdom (age). This event will take place at the conclusion of their current age.

When the word "age" appears in the English Bible, it often refers to a dispensational period. However, there are exceptions. For example:

**Luke 20:34** Jesus answered and said to them, "The sons of this **age** marry and are given in marriage. <sup>35</sup> But those who are counted worthy to attain that **age**, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage." (emphasis added)

In this passage, Jesus uses "*aeon*" not to identify specific dispensations but rather to denote broad periods of time. The phrase "the people of this age marry" refers to time, while the second "age" alludes to eternity.

Dispensations should be regarded as periods during which God interacts with humanity based on a particular set of rules pertinent to that time. We

can consider this an “administration.” There are seven dispensations, and God employs them to progressively reveal His plan for humanity. The truths of each subsequent dispensation build on those established in previous ones, with the ultimate goal being the redemption of what was lost at the Fall of Adam.

### **Characteristics and objectives of dispensations:**

1. Every dispensation starts with a blessing for humanity that serves as a test.
2. Man will ultimately fail that test.
3. Every dispensation concludes with God's judgment for that failure.
4. Each dispensation is designed to teach man something about himself.
5. Each dispensation is designed to teach man something about God and His plan for mankind.

## **Dispensational Periods**

### **Age of Innocence**

This initial dispensational period, also referred to as the Garden of Eden, is described in Genesis 1:28-31. It commenced with the creation of Adam and the woman and concluded with their expulsion from the Garden.

**Genesis 1:28** Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

<sup>29</sup> And God said, “See, I have given you every herb *that* yields seed which *is* on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food. <sup>30</sup> Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which *there is* life, *I have given* every green herb for food”; and it was so.

<sup>31</sup> Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed *it was* very good. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day.

In Genesis 2:17, God explicitly prohibits Adam and Eve from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This serves as their test.

**Genesis 2:17** but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

Eating the fruit from this one tree would lead to certain “death.” While we have no examples of “death” prior to Adam’s sin, we must assume that the LORD made such instructions clear. This test challenged humanity (Adam and Eve) regarding their allegiance and love for God, affirming their roles as created beings with free will. This unique tree (of the knowledge of good and evil) symbolizes the understanding of what nurtures life and what harms it. Furthermore, choosing to eat from this tree represented an unhealthy independence from God, even self-autonomy. Would man choose to live with God, under God, remaining obedient and trusting toward Him?

In reading the account of the Fall from Genesis 3:1-7, it is essential to recognize that Satan indirectly assaults Adam, the federal head of the human race, by engaging Eve in a persuasive conversation. Satan subtly questions the validity of what God said (v.1), then boldly contradicts God's word (v.4) and cleverly probes God’s motives (v.5). This shifting of the issue transforms a straightforward prohibition into doubt concerning the Creator’s morality. Satan suggests that choosing the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is, in fact, a means of self-improvement—“your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.” Eve succumbs. Scripture states simply, “she gave to her husband ... and he ate,” without exploring why! Did Adam love her and feel the need to join her? In 1 Timothy 2:14, it is noted that Eve was deceived, but Adam sinned willfully.

Spiritual death occurred immediately, evidenced by their troubled conscience and sense of vulnerability (3:7). However, rather than approaching God with a repentant spirit, they sought their own form of correction—leaves for covering—and adopted a defensive stance (see the dialogue in 3:8-13).

**Genesis 3:12** Then the man said, “The woman whom You gave *to be* with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate.”

<sup>13</sup> And the Lord God said to the woman, “What *is* this you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

Adam blamed Eve, saying, “She gave me of the tree, and I ate,” but it was really God’s fault because He had given him the woman.

The judgment that followed created an ongoing system of sorrow and pain affecting both Adam and Eve, as illustrated in verses 15 to 19. This judgment included mutual hostility toward creation (v. 15), anguish and pain in childbirth (v. 16), conflict among humans (v. 16), enmity with the soil (v. 17), suffering of the physical body (vs. 17 and 19), and ultimately, physical death (v. 19). The environment that had once provided pleasure would now generate disease, violent storms, war, domestic violence, illness, injury, and the end of human life in various forms.

A promise or new truth was given. This promise is more implied than stated (see 3:15 and God’s activity in 3:21). The promise is that the Seed of the woman (Christ) will strike the head of the serpent (Satan), who is the true culprit in this calamity. This promised “Seed” offers recovery, but recovery comes at a cost. God tells the serpent, “but you shall bruise His heel,” referring to the Cross. The Seed of the woman will also suffer.

This is the first prophecy of the coming Christ and the judgment of sin. The “tunics of skin” arise from the death of an innocent lamb, foreshadowing the death of Christ, who provides us with coverings of righteousness through imputation (Romans 3:24-25). All of this serves as a veiled description of the future solution to the problem they created.

Did they understand that this represented a picture of the Cross and the judgment of sin? Unlikely, but God made a promise, and they placed their faith in His promises. Thus, salvation relied on faith in whatever aspect of God’s plan was revealed to mankind at that time. We will see this in subsequent dispensations, as God continually reveals more of His plan for redeeming what Adam lost in the Garden. In each following dispensation, more is disclosed, with new truths building on what was previously revealed. More is expected of humanity. It isn’t until Jesus establishes His ministry that God reveals that His plan includes the Messiah going to the Cross, being judged for our sins in our place, and dying. When Jesus tells His disciples this, they refuse to believe Him, even though Isaiah 53 had



depicted all this quite clearly. The Rabbis had taught that this was a picture of the suffering of the nation Israel.

In this initial dispensation, man was created perfect and innocent, placed in an ideal environment, given a simple test of obedience, and warned about the consequences of disobedience. Despite being tempted by Satan, man exercised his free will and chose to disobey. In the perfect conditions of the Garden, with only one straightforward rule to follow, humanity faltered. The stewardship of innocence ended with judgment and expulsion from Eden.

**Genesis 3:24** So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.

### **Age of Conscience or Moral Responsibility**

The second dispensation began with the Fall and ended with the Flood. This dispensation marks a transition from theoretical to experiential knowledge of good and evil (Gen 3:5-7, 22). Humanity sinned by entering the realm of moral experience. Thus, humanity "became as God" through a personal experience of distinguishing good from evil. However, unlike God, this stewardship was obtained through making the wrong choice.

The new test in this dispensation is that God has entrusted man with the stewardship of moral responsibility, which requires him to do all that is good, avoid evil, and approach God through blood sacrifices.

Although Adam and Eve are out of the garden (3:23-24), their relationship with God likely continued similar to before, although now it was limited. However, humans are expected to present sacrifices to the LORD, as demonstrated in Genesis 4:1-10. The difference between Abel's offering and Cain's offering (which did not include blood) is deliberately emphasized—the LORD accepts (respects) only Abel's offering of the firstborn of a flock (sheep) and rejects Cain's produce from the ground. Abel demonstrated his faith through the "blood" offering (Hebrews 11:4), which, of course, is a type of the Cross.

Cain reacts to the LORD's rejection of his sacrifice with anger and a refusal to repent, as shown by the LORD's instruction in 4:7.

**Genesis 4:7** "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire *is* for you, but you should rule over it."

God gives Cain a chance to confront his issues—"if you do well," meaning to repent and offer a blood sacrifice. This response also includes a warning about the power of sin to overtake him—"sin lies at the door." Cain's flawed theology leads to unethical behavior, culminating in the murder of his brother (v. 8). He behaves more like the seed of the serpent than the seed of the woman.

After ignoring his conscience regarding both the sacrifice and the murder of his brother, Cain sins and faces judgment. When the LORD investigates Abel's disappearance, Cain responds bitterly toward God (vs. 9). Cain's rejection of divine authority during God's inquiry is further emphasized in 4:16, where he separates himself from the LORD's presence. The phrase "presence of the LORD" suggests a place or state of continuous interaction with the LORD following Adam's fall and expulsion from the garden. However, the key distinction is that Cain chooses to abandon God's presence. Cain's wickedness will impact generations to come, as seen in Genesis 6.

A curse is placed on Cain similar to that on Satan and humanity in Genesis 3:15, which deprives him of his livelihood as a farmer (4:11-12). He is now labeled a "fugitive and vagabond," indicating that he is a wanderer. Furthermore, Cain's arrogance is magnified through his descendants (4:17-24).

Genesis 6 describes the increasing distortion of life under "conscience" as humans interbreed with angelic beings, leading to a rebellious coalition of angels and humans. It states that "the wickedness of man was great... and every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (see 6:5). This results in divine indignation (6:6-7) towards mankind, which has become "corrupt and violent" (6:11).

Similar to what occurred with Adam and Eve, a significant act of judgment transpires: the Noahic Flood, which eliminates all human life except for those on the ark (6:17, 21-23). Just as the LORD provided coats of skin for Adam and Eve, He also extends protection to Noah, who "found grace in the eyes of the LORD" (6:8).

Clearly, human conscience alone is insufficient to promote obedience and foster righteous behavior. Humanity needs an external stimulus or support to act morally.

### **Age of Human Government**

The third dispensation began when Noah and his family exited the ark and concluded at the Tower of Babel. In the previous dispensation, the restraint was internal. Now, a new external restraint, the authority of civil government, has been introduced.

Man underwent a new test. While he remained directly accountable to God according to his conscience, God delegated certain aspects of His authority to him. Man was to obey God by submitting to his fellow man, thereby establishing a corporate relationship among individuals through human governance.

The divine institution of government was established to regulate human behavior. However, humanity used government to usurp God's divinity and attain independence from God through astrology.

The test endowed with authority from God poses the question: Will mankind govern its predatory instincts and protect human life? Noah, in Genesis 6:8-9, serves as the prime example of godly integrity, reflecting justice in his interactions with others. It is his singular godliness that preserves his family's life (Hebrews 11:7). The ability to take human life is the greatest power granted. Will it be used wisely or simply to serve selfish interests?

Chapter 10 of Genesis recounts the story of Noah's sons and their descendants spreading across the earth. Notably, Ham's lineage includes a figure named Nimrod, who rises to power—described as the "mighty one on the earth" (10:8)—and is renowned for his hunting skills (vs. 9).

Furthermore, Nimrod establishes a kingdom that includes significant cities, one of which is called “Babel” (vs. 10-11). The name “Nimrod” translates to “rebel” or “we shall rebel,” emphasizing his defiance of divine commands. Genesis 10:9 refers to Nimrod as “before the LORD,” which is often interpreted as a sign of his lack of submission to God, indicating arrogance.

Genesis 11:1-4 illustrates humanity's effort to assert itself against God, stating, “let us build ourselves a city whose top reaches the heavens (place of God)...let us make a name for ourselves.” This concept of “a name for ourselves” signifies the pursuit of self-promotion, status, and power. The well-organized city and tower of Babel embody human arrogance and self-advancement, even in God's presence. It echoes Genesis 3:5, which proclaims, “You will be like God.”

We note that the purpose of government has shifted from providing protection and justice to fostering self-empowerment and control. This issue remains relevant today. The unified language, speech, and purpose symbolize totalitarianism or universalism, which results in a loss of human freedom (see 11:6). Satan continues to seek a one-world government, which will be emphasized during the Tribulation.

Divine retribution is evident in Genesis 11:7-9 through God's division of languages and the scattering of people. This obstacle to communication abruptly ended their shared arrogance. The specific manner in which God confused their language (verse 9) is not elaborated upon. His justice required punitive measures that divided the world (10:25) and hindered efforts toward universalism (Revelation 13:3, 12, 14, 17).

Although the lesson learned is that human government cannot produce righteousness in mankind, humanity's responsibility for governance does not end. It will persist until Christ establishes His Kingdom, at which time the glorious reign of our Lord Jesus Christ will ultimately take the place of human governing authority.

## **Conclusion**

As we have observed, each dispensation advances God's plan and the way He interacts with His creation. Salvation is always by faith, and each dispensation uncovers more about the object of that faith.