

Dispensations: God Is In Control of Your Life and the World



- Do you ever feel like your life is out of control?
- When was the last time you suffered hardship and asked yourself, "Where is God?"

One of the central messages of the Bible is that God is sovereign and He is in control of the flow of history. He has a plan for each of our lives and the nations of the world. This plan is progressively unfolding throughout the centuries.

The subject of **dispensations** deals with the unfolding of God's sovereign plan for the ages. Dispensations show us the big picture—the biblical overview of *what God is doing* and *what God is saying* to us individually and to all humanity throughout time.

The Central Lesson and Application:
God is in control of your life and the world—trust Him & live for Him.

I. What Is a Dispensation?

A. Word Origin

The word "dispensation" is used *only* by the King James translation. The NAS, NIV, and NLT use words such as "administration, stewardship, or plan." It is derived from the Greek **οικονομια** (oy-kon-om-ee-ah), which is two words connected together:

- οΙΚΟΣ** (oy-kos) which means "house" and
- νομος** (nom-os) which means "law or rule."

Together they mean **to rule a house, the management of a household**. The word is used 20 times in the New Testament in various forms. Ephesians 1:10 and 3:2 in particular use the word to refer to God's administering rule over the world.

Ephesians 1:10 King James Translation

*"¹⁰ That in the **dispensation** (dispensation) of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him:"*

Ephesians 1:10 New Living Translation

*"¹⁰ And this is **the plan** (dispensation): At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth."*

Dr. Charles C. Ryrie explained in his book *Dispensationalism Today*:

"To summarize: Dispensationalism views the world as a **household run by God**. In this household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the process of time." (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), p.31.

B. Definition

The most popular definition for dispensation is one given by C.I. Scofield in his Reference Bible notes: "A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect to his

obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God." *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.3.

Another helpful definition is given by Renald E. Showers with The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry. He defines dispensations as: "... a particular way of God's administering His rule over the world as He progressively works out His purpose for world history." *There Really Is a Difference!* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1990), p.30.

C. Clarification

Dispensations are **NOT** different ways of salvation at different periods of time. Salvation has always been by grace through faith! C.I. Scofield clarifies:

"These different dispensations are not separate ways of salvation. During each of them man is reconciled to God in only one way, i.e. by God's grace through the work of Christ that was accomplished on the cross and vindicated in His resurrection...the purpose of each dispensation, then, is to place man under a specific rule of conduct, but such stewardship is not a condition of salvation...salvation has been and will continue to be available to him by God's grace through faith." *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, p.3.

D. Common Perspectives

Christians who accept the dispensational view of Bible history share some important common perspectives or beliefs:

1. **The distinction between ISRAEL and the CHURCH.** God's promises in the Old Testament to Israel are not fulfilled in the New Testament church. God has a specific plan for Israel and He has a specific plan for the New Testament church. The church did not replace Israel! The church is distinct from Israel.

In contrast, Covenant Theology views the Church as replacing Israel. Everything promised to Israel throughout the Old Testament Prophets and Covenants are now transferred and applied to the church. Israel being replaced by the Church is God's judgment on Israel because of Israel's rebellion. Today the Church is Israel and the original Israel no longer exists and never will again. Covenant theology is also called "Replacement Theology."

2. **The New Testament church was a "MYSTERY" to Old Testament prophecy.** God revealed His plans concerning the church only in the New Testament (Ephesians 3:2-12; 5:32).
3. **The consistent use of the LITERAL, HISTORIC, GRAMMATICAL method of interpreting the Bible.** The Bible is understood by its common, ordinary meaning as intended in the culture and times in which it was originally written. Those who reject Dispensational Theology, wrongly allegorize several important prophetic passages dealing with the end times.

E. Distinguishing Characteristics

Dispensations have at least three distinguishing characteristics. Again, Dr. Charles C. Ryrie writes:

"...the distinguishing characteristics of a different dispensation are: (1) a change in God's governmental relationship with man..., (2) a resultant change in man's responsibility, and (3) corresponding revelation necessary to effect the change...." *Dispensationalism Today*, pp. 37,38.

In short, the distinguishing marks of dispensations are:

1. A new revelation
2. A new responsibility
3. A new relationship

II. How Many Dispensations Are There?

Most dispensationalists today see **SEVEN** dispensations described throughout the Bible. However, over the past several hundred years it has not always been the same seven nor limited to seven. Some taught as few as four while others as many as eight.

The current most common listing is:

1. **Innocency**—Gen 1:28 (Creation to the Fall).
2. **Conscience**—Gen. 3:7 (The Fall to the Flood).
3. **Human Government**—Gen. 8:15 (The Flood to Babel).
4. **Promise**—Gen. 12:1 (Babel to Mount Sinai).
5. **Law**—Exodus 19:1 (Mount Sinai to Pentecost).
6. **Grace or Church**—Acts 2:1 (Pentecost to the Rapture).
7. **Kingdom**—Rev. 20:4 (The Rapture to the Great White Throne).

Are You A Dispensationalist?

Technically, every true Christian is a dispensationalist. Theologian Charles L. Feinberg writes:

“To a considerable degree, all Christians are dispensationalist,’ because (1) Any person is a dispensationalist who trusts the blood of Christ rather than bringing an animal sacrifice. (2) Any person is a dispensationalist who disclaims any right or title to the land which God covenanted to Israel for an everlasting inheritance. And (3) any person is a dispensationalist who observes the first day of the week rather than the seventh.” *Millennialism: The Two Major Views* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p.69.

There is no question to the existence of dispensations. They are definitely revealed in scripture. The **number** of dispensations may be open to debate, but not the **existence** of dispensations.

III. How Do Dispensations Relate to Our Lives Today?

1. **They show us that God is the SOVEREIGN Lord who will unfold His plan for the ages.** Nations will rise and fall but God's purposes will be accomplished! Every human being must answer to Him! (cf. Isaiah 45:22-24; Daniel 2:20-22; 4:17; Philippians 2:9-11).
2. **They show us man's persistent FAILURE, defiance, depravity, and eventual ruin.** No matter what favorable condition man exists under, he continually falls and ends in ruin. No one will be able to excuse himself for his sin and rejection of God's salvation. Man will never save himself! (cf. Romans 2:1-6; 3:9-20)
3. **They show us man's need for a PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP with God.** Man has no hope of peace apart from a personal saving relationship with the prince of peace, Jesus Christ (cf. Romans 5:1; 8:1).

Renald E. Showers gives an excellent answer to the question—how do dispensations impact our lives today? He writes:

"First, they demonstrate that God is the sovereign Ruler throughout history in spite of Satan's attempt to overthrow that rule and man's rebellion against it... Second, the dispensations show how desperately man needs to submit to God's rule in order to have things right on earth. They display the disorder and tragedy which result from the rejection of God's rule. Third, the dispensations progressively move history toward the fulfillment of its God-intended climax. In the final 'dispensation of the fullness of times' (Eph. 1:9-10 [added—KJV]), God will fully glorify Himself by crushing Satan and his kingdom (Rom. 16:20; Rev. 20:1-3), restoring His own Kingdom rule to the earth through Jesus Christ (Rev. 11:15; 20:4-6), and reversing the tragic consequences of man's rebellion (Mt. 19:28; Acts 3:19-21)." *There Really Is a Difference!* p.51.

Conclusion

God is sovereign and He is in control of the flow of history. He has a plan for each of our lives and the nations of the world. This plan is progressively unfolding throughout the centuries. God is in control of your life and of the world—trust Him & live for Him.

Dispensations & Covenants

Chart by Timothy J. Henning, 2020

| 1. Innocence Gen. 1:28-3:6 | 2. Conscience Gen. 3:7-8:14 | 3. Government Gen. 8:15-11:9 | 4. Promise Gen. 11:10- Ex. 18:27 | 5. Law Ex. 19:1- Acts 1:26 | 6. Grace Acts 2:1- Rev. 19:21 | 7. Kingdom Acts 2:1- Rev. 19:21 |
|--|---------------------------------------|---|---|---|--|--|
| Dispensations | | Noah to Babel | | Law to Christ's Ascension | | Millennium |
| The Garden | Fall to Flood | Abram to Exodus | | Pentecost to 2nd Coming | | |
| Covenants | | 3. Noahic Gen. 8:20-9:17 | | 5. Mosaic Ex. 19:5-6; 20-23 | | 8. New - Jer. 31:31-34 |
| 1. Edenic Gen. 1:18-30; 2:15-17 | 2. Adamic Gen. 3:14-19 | 4. Abrahamic Gen. 12:1-3; 15:18-21 | | 6. Palestinian Deut. 30:1-10 | | |
| | | | | 7. Davidic 2 Sam. 7:8-16 | | |