

Bible Basics Conference 2008: Dispensations

Part 1

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Place	Catford
Date	08.11.2008
Duration	00:21:41
Online version	https://www.audioteaching.org/en/sermons/cbb002/bible-basics-conference-2008-dispensations

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[00:00:01] Guten Morgen.

I hope that my voice will hold out. It's a little bit croaky, but I trust that with the amplification of a microphone, you'll all be able to hear. The concept of a dispensation.

Originally, we were going to roll the first two sessions together, the concept of a dispensation and what dispensations are there. But we realized that really we had to get our definitions in place first.

If we were writing a book, we might plunge right into the subject and put the definitions in a glossary or an appendix at the back. But in a live presentation, we can't do that.

It would be a little bit like trying to build a house by setting up the walls and the roof, then trying to slide in the foundation underneath, result disaster. [00:01:08] So we're going to spend this first session talking about what we mean by a dispensation.

The most important question, of course, is, is it scriptural? I mean, we talk about dispensations, but where does that word come in the scriptures? There is a word that is used in the New Testament called oikonomia, and it means a dispensation or an administration.

On the screen there, you can see five scriptures that use that expression. 1 Corinthians 9.17 says, [00:02:04] For it is woe to me if I should not announce the glad tidings. For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward.

But if not of my own will, I am entrusted with an administration.

Paul was entrusted with the responsibility of preaching the gospel. The second one uses that word in a rather different sense. For the administration of the fullness of times to head up all things in Christ. That, of course, is referring not to the preaching of the gospel. It's referring to the fullness of times, which we understand to be the millennium. The third one, Paul's responsibility in relation to the grace of God, revealed to him for the blessing of others, If indeed ye have heard of the administration of the

grace of God, which has been given to me towards you. [00:03:07] The fourth one, and to enlighten all, of what is the administration of the mystery hidden throughout the ages in God. The administration of the mystery. Something yet to be revealed, but revealed through the Spirit now to us.

Paul's responsibility as a servant of the church. The assembly of which I became minister according to the dispensation of God, which is given me towards you to complete the word of God. The mystery which has been hidden.

Different uses of that word administration or dispensation. Here's a slightly different one. [00:04:03] Where it's translated stewardship, and it means stewardship. A thought a little bit beyond just an administration, but the same word in the Greek. The stewardship is an arrangement under which the steward was accountable for matters entrusted to him. We're probably familiar with this concept in our own day. But you know the story in Luke 16.

There was a man who was a steward. He had not handled his master's goods well, and the threat was that he would no longer be steward. Now, I find that one of the most difficult passages in Luke to understand.

But leaving that to one side, you're familiar with the scene. Here is an arrangement under which a steward is responsible to the one who's put him in that position. And he is accountable for the things which are in his charge. [00:05:05] Now, so we've seen in six cases that the word dispensation or stewardship, same Greek word, is used in the scripture. Now, is the concept biblical? It's one thing to say, yes, we can find that word in the scripture, but are we interpreting it, are we understanding it in the right way?

Well, I think we can see in those examples we've looked at that there are certain common features among some or all of them.

As far as Paul's administration was concerned, there was a revelation from God, and there was a corresponding responsibility on his part to whom that revelation was made. [00:06:02] Stewardship responsibilities mean that failure in carrying out those responsibilities may bring an end to the stewardship.

Now, those features, I think, are important, and they will help us in our understanding of what we mean by an administration or a dispensation.

We could apply that situation to many scenes that we read of in the Bible. Perhaps the easiest one to understand is Adam and Eve.

In the second chapter of Genesis, they're given a responsibility. They're put in charge of God's creation on this earth.

They sinned, and that charge that had been theirs to watch over and to tend the Garden of Eden [00:07:03] was taken from them, and they were driven out.

Here is perhaps the first example of failure in an administration that comes to an end.

We can think of some of the words of the Lord himself in these concepts.

In Matthew 11, 11, the Lord's words, he says, Among them that are born of women there hath not been a greater than John the Baptist, notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. In the second one, Matthew 16, 18, Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church. [00:08:04] Scriptural evidence that things change.

If we want to define a dispensation, I would offer it to you, Mr. C.C. Ryrie's dispensation, dispensational definition. A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose. Think about that.

A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose.

You may think of variations on that. You may want to expand it somewhat.

But I think we've already seen that the essential features, and perhaps they are more important than a precise definition, the essential features of a dispensation are that it involves some distinctive revelation from God. [00:09:06] Now, I'm not going to give you examples, more examples, because the second session is going to try and identify what these dispensations actually are. Every time that that revelation is given or that stewardship, there is a responsibility on the part of man.

And when we get to look into the dispensations, I think we'll find that inevitably, sooner or later, man fails in that responsibility that he has been given.

And the failure may mean that the dispensation is no longer viable and therefore a new dispensation is brought in.

Now, it may seem obvious, but what we're talking about here are things that happen on the earth. [00:10:06] We are talking about things that have happened in time or will happen in time. We're not speaking about heavenly things. We're not speaking about eternity past. We're not speaking about eternity yet to come.

It is God's dealings with man or men here upon the earth.

Just a rider that although we tend to speak of dispensations, although it's a matter of time, that's not really right. It's not synonymous with an age or a period of time, but in practice, of course, because of man's failure, one dispensation generally is replaced by another, but the concept is not of time. It is of administration.

[00:11:05] God's ways.

I'm sorry. Some evidences of dispensational change first. Very quickly.

The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. John 1.17.

Galatians 4.4, but when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his son, made of a woman made under the law, when the fullness of time was come. The one that I suppose comes most readily to mind, Hebrews 1.1 and 2, God who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his son.

A concept we're all familiar with. Times passed by the prophets, then finally God sent his son.

[00:12:05] And so on. 1 Corinthians 10.11, now all these things happened unto them, that's the Israelites. For in samples, and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world, that is the ends of the ages, are come. Galatians 3.25, speaking of the law, but after that faith is come, we are no more under a schoolmaster.

Incidentally, that word schoolmaster, it doesn't mean a learned professor, it means one who has charge of children. So in the well-organized Roman household, there would be someone whose job was to take the children to school and bring them back again. Now it is in that sense that we can understand the law as a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ. The others, too, are quite well known. No one putteth a piece of new cloth into an old garment, [00:13:02] neither do men put new wine into old bottles. Matthew 11.11, we've already covered. Revelation 1.19, write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter. The opening of the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Things which are and things which shall be hereafter. Now, speaking of dispensations and changes that have occurred, we may be tempted to think that God changed his mind, that he wasn't omniscient, perhaps, that he didn't realize how things would work out. Well, I think we can show quite clearly that that is not the case.

[00:14:02] Matthew 21 is a parable.

It's the parable of the servants who were sent to work in a vineyard. And the master of the vineyard sent one, and he was stoned, and another one was maltreated, and last of all, he sent his own son and said, surely they will reverence my son. Now, reading that scripture superficially, it is easy to get the impression that one experiment was tried after another, and in the end, they didn't really work, and the son was rejected to the shock of the one who had sent him. But God's ways are not like that. God knew the end from the beginning. Genesis 15-16, perhaps, puts that into perspective. It is just speaking of its words spoken to Abraham of his seed, [00:15:02] the tribe of Israel, but in the fourth generation, they shall come hither again, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full. Now, think about that. The iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full. God is telling Abraham what is going to happen.

It's not going to be brought into being for some generations after Israel had initially gone down into Egypt.

The restoration of them to Israel was waiting on the fullness of the iniquity of the Amorites, in other words, waiting until those nations that were living in Canaan had developed their evil ways to the full, and God was justified in bringing in their execution and bringing his people into the land for blessing. God knows the end from the beginning.

[00:16:02] Genesis 6, of course, is a well-known example.

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, and it repented to the Lord that he had made man on the earth and it grieved him at his heart. Did God not know that this would come about? Oh, yes, God knew it, but again he waited until the iniquity of man had really gone to its full extent.

Heavenly beings mixing with earthly beings, a most ungodly way of behavior, man on the earth developing his wickedness to its fullest extent. God was grieved in his heart, and it grieved him to the extent that he made man, [00:17:03] but it was not a surprise. Yet even there, one man Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord, and he was wonderfully preserved. These are serious questions, but there is a divine answer. The divine foreknowledge foresees all these things, gives man a chance, time and time again, in each and every day, gives man a chance, time and time again, in each dispensation until it ends in either failure or disobedience or both.

God had his plans and his counsels in place even before man was put to the test.

Proverbs 8, 30 and 31, Then I was by him as one brought up with him, and I was daily his delight, [00:18:01] rejoicing always before him, rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth, and my delights were with the sons of men.

Don't you love to think of that scene in eternity past, the father and the son together, rejoicing in the joys of heaven, and the thoughts of the son were with the sons of men, and all of that which he was going to bring to come to pass in due time. 1 Peter 1, 20, Who verily, speaking of the Lamb of God, who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you, who by him do believe in God, that raised him up from the dead and gave him glory, that your faith and hope might be in God.

Ephesians 1, verses 3 to 6, [00:19:01] uses phrases like chosen in him before the foundation of the world, and of ourselves having predestinated us unto the adoption of children, and according to the good pleasure of his will.

They are some of the evidences of God's plans, his forethought from the beginning. We've been looking at this from perhaps a slightly quizzical point of view, trying to find fault in asking the questions that men might ask, but really a study of a subject like this, the dispensations, we shouldn't approach it in that critical sort of way. We should approach it in a spirit of praise and wonder at what God has done, and that is why I want to read to you this last scripture mentioned on the slide, [00:20:01] because at this point, Romans 11, the Apostle Paul has been going through the ways of God in grace, to all men, chapters 1 to 8, his ways with Israel, chapters 9, 10, and 11, and right at the end of that chapter, he bursts out into praise, and I don't say it surprises me every time I read it, but it thrills me every time I read it, because what he's been saying leads up to it so very gently. He's been writing about the goodness and severity of God, and things like that, and then right at the end of chapter 11, he says, and I'm going to finish here.

The words indited by the Holy Spirit will finish this session better than any words of mine, so we will just read these verses, and then I'll sit down. Oh, the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

[00:21:07] How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out!

For who hath known the mind of the Lord?

Or who hath been His counsellor?

Or who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto Him again?

For of Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things.

To whom be glory for ever. Amen.