

Bible Basics Conference 2008: Dispensations

Part 2

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[00:00:01] Good morning everyone again, and thank you to Brother Hugh A. for the presentation and B. for giving me five extra minutes. It's very rare.

Now, the title of the second session is, What Dispensations Are There?

And what I would really like to do is give everyone of you a piece of paper with nothing on it, just white and a pen, and ask you to write down what dispensations you think there are. And I expect that probably I would get different answers on different papers.

Now, that being the case, perhaps you will forgive me if today you might also get more answers than one in this session here, in this talk. But perhaps that's something to mention up front, that it shouldn't be disconcerting at all if you find that there are different books on the subject, and one book has seven dispensations, and one has five, and one has eight. [00:01:12] I don't think that's the main issue. The main issue is that there are dispensations, and I'm glad that Brother Hugh has defined this for us. He's told us that God deals with different people at different times in different ways.

Now, that concept has been attacked a lot, but I hope we'll see that it's not a concept that throws any shadow on God or his ways, but the contrary is true. It vindicates God in his ways.

But before I carry on with this, I want to introduce you to this young lady you see on this slide. She is called Mary.

I came across her a couple of years ago when I read an article on ultra-dispensationalism, and I thought, that must be a very complicated article, and I started reading, and it started off with a story. [00:02:15] And Mr. Ironside, he tells this story of Mary.

It's a while back. It must be a while back, but she worked in a household in a good working-class family, and after a while, she understood very well how the household had to be run.

She had to get up at 5. She prepared breakfast.

She rang the bell to wake everyone up.

She prepared packed lunches for everyone.

At 6.30, everyone was at the breakfast table, and at 7 o'clock in the morning, everyone left for work, packed lunches in hand. [00:03:04] Now, that was very good, but after a while, she got a new job. And this time, it was in a banker's family in a mansion up on the hill.

And when she arrived, first day, she said, when the lady who was running the house, when she tried to instruct Mary and to tell her how things should be done, Mary said, actually, you don't need to tell me. I've got a lot of experience.

I've been working in another household, and I know how a household is run.

Her new boss was a bit surprised, but she said, okay, then, let's see how it goes. And next morning, at 5 o'clock, Mary got up, started making breakfast and sandwiches.

That was still fine, but when she rang the wake-up bell at 5.30, the banker's family was very disconcerted.

[00:04:09] And the lady shouted down the stairs, well, what's all this noise? And Mary said, well, I've made breakfast. It's time to come down. And the lady says, well, we never have breakfast before 8.30. Oh, said Mary, and I've already made the packed lunches. And the lady said, well, nobody in this house ever takes packed lunches to work. When I come down, I'll explain to you how this household is run.

Now, you see Mary's problem.

She did not have a grasp of dispensational truth at that time. But she came to realize that it was very important to realize that a different household is run according to different rules from another household. [00:05:01] And that's exactly what God has done and is fully entitled to do with mankind. He can set the rules, and he can set different rules at different points in time. The important thing is that we are not like Mary on day one in the banker's family, and we behave as though we were living in a different dispensation, but that we are intelligent as to the dispensation we live in.

I believe most of the points on this slide we have covered. I can move very quickly here.

Basically, in a new dispensation, you will find that there is a new way of ruling or governing things. Brother Hugh has been speaking about the economist or economist, the steward, the one who is entrusted with an administration, who runs the house according to certain rules, and God has the right to do the same.

[00:06:04] Hugh has also given us verses that have shown very clear changes.

Verses that say, there was a time when, but now things are different.

So it's clear from those verses that there are different dispensations. Now, the quiz question is, well, which ones are there?

I'll give you some suggestions.

The objective is not so much to quarrel about how many there are or when exactly they started or finished, but the objective is to show a little bit of the character of God in dealing with man in these different time periods. I will offer some suggestions later on on how this scheme might be modified.

Now, again, it was mentioned already in the first session [00:07:03] that there was the time when Adam and Eve were in the paradise. It was the time of innocence, as you read in Genesis 2, and it was, in a way, a very simple rule or administration.

They were not allowed to eat of the tray of the knowledge of good and evil. And you find that God actually placed man in an environment that was ideal. It was a garden. It was a paradise. There was everything there for man to enjoy. And you might say, well, this must have been a very happy time, but we have no indication that it lasted very long.

And the first thing you read of what happened in that garden is failure. Now, that's something that will be a recurring theme as we go through dispensations. You might say a dispensation, you would expect perhaps a dispensation to run on [00:08:03] until a point in time where there is a significant failure, and then you would expect the dispensation to close. But what you actually find is that with a new dispensation, the failure occurs right at the beginning.

And so it is here that the first thing you read is about the fall, and the result is judgment that man is barred from Eden, and there was, of course, the curse which resulted from the fall.

You then have a different time period from that point onwards until the time of the flood.

And something had changed, of course. What hadn't been the case before is that man now has a conscience. A conscience is a very complicated, a very useful, and sometimes a very irksome thing.

[00:09:09] I heard of a painter who wanted to draw a conscience, and what he did was he drew a horse that was running at full speed, followed by a swarm of insects.

It was trying to get away, but the faster it ran, the faster the insects followed. Now that's the sort of thing the conscience does. When man does wrong, conscience will tell him. Now that's unless, over time, conscience gets distorted.

Then it's only, as somebody has said, it's a reasonable goad but not a reliable guide.

Now, in any case, it's new guidance that's given to man, a new instrument to direct him, and you might say, well, now that man has this new capacity, things will be better. [00:10:05] And the first thing that happened when man had this capacity of distinguishing good from evil was a murder between brothers.

And it's shocking that, again, at the start of the dispensation, there is complete failure. Now, that doesn't mean that the dispensation finished, and I think that shows us something of the patience of God. Actually, as one writer has said, a study of the dispensations will give us a deep impression of how patient God has been with man.

So you find the end of this time period, you have the flood, and end again in judgment. Now, after the flood, of course, there was again a change.

And you might say, again, it was a change that should have helped man to act righteously [00:11:04] and to behave in a good way. What was the change?

Well, you'll all say, of course, God entrusted government to Noah. God said to Noah, if somebody sheds blood by the sword, then by the sword his blood shall be shed. So now you have man who has a conscience, and in addition, there is government that has been instituted to suppress evil. And you think, now things must go fine.

Well, and what happens? The first thing that happens is that Noah gets drunk.

The one who was meant to govern and rule the world showed that he was not able to actually govern and rule himself.

And you find at the end of this time that there is judgment from God at the time of the Tower of Babel, [00:12:02] a full confusion of languages and a dispersion of man over the earth.

Now, you might have said, well, I don't want to say if you were God, but you might have expected God at this time to give up and to say, well, I've tried innocence in a wonderful garden, I've tried man under conscience, and I've tried man under government, and he's failed three times, now that's it. Well, God is so patient, he didn't stop there. But actually, he now said, well, I make a completely new start. What I will do is I will call out one man, Abraham, and I will bless him and bless his descendants, set apart from everyone else.

And you might say, well, if God singles out one man in that way and decides to bless him, well, things must go well with him [00:13:02] and things must go well with his descendants. What happened?

You all know that this was in Genesis 12.

A few verses down, you find that Abraham goes down to Egypt and he pronounces what is at least a half-truth or half-lie, or let's say a half-truth is a full lie, about who his wife was. And instead of being a blessing to the nations, as was his calling, he wasn't that at all.

And what happens at the end of that dispensation, just remember that the point of the dispensation is that one man is called out, is given a country, and he's going to be blessed in that country. And what happens at the end of that dispensation is that the descendants of that man, Abraham, they are in a different country, in Egypt, and they are enslaved with serving cruel Pharaoh.

[00:14:05] Well, now we had innocence.

We had the guide of conscience. We had the mechanism, you might say, of government suppressing evil. And we had the special favor of promise. Now what else is there that can be done? Well, there's one more thing that can be done.

You might say, if you write down the nitty-gritty, all the details of daily life, and you tell man exactly what he can do and what he can't do, and when he's got to do things and how he's got to do things,

then at least there is a firm rule, and that will go well. Well, that's what God has done with one people, with Israel. He's written down very detailed rules in the law, and you all know how that went. [00:15:01] You know that when Moses was on the way down from the mountain that the tables or that the law on the tables which he had in his hands had already been broken. And again you find that the failure occurs in the very beginning of the dispensation.

It's not that it goes well for a while and then failure comes in somewhere, but there is failure immediately. And what happened?

Well, in the end, God actually had to send Israel into captivity. They had to leave the land that they had been promised. First, the ten tribes were sent away into Assyria. Later on, the two tribes were sent away into captivity in Babylon. And ultimately, in the year 70, there was the destruction of Jerusalem, and it was now obvious for all that although a remnant of two tribes had returned to Jerusalem, it was now obvious for all [00:16:03] that God had finished, for the time being, with Israel, that Israel had been completely judged and set aside.

Now, what's left?

You might say it's completely hopeless, isn't it? Innocence, conscience, government, promise, law, and failure everywhere. So it is hopeless.

And that's exactly where God starts in his work of grace. It's really the starting point for grace that man is proven to be beyond repair, you might say, that man is proven to be completely helpless and completely hopeless.

And that's, as Brother Hugh mentioned, the fullness of time, when God sent his son and when, as it said in John 1, [00:17:01] as Moses had brought the law, Jesus Christ brought grace and truth.

Now, during this time, you find, and we'll come back to this, you find kind of a parallel program. On the one hand, you find a program on earth that's to do with the nations. God no longer recognizes Israel as his people, but there are nations.

And at the same time, you find, that's what I mean by parallel program, you find that there are people who are called out of that course of the world and they are called out to belong to Christ. Now, called out, of course, you all know means ecclesia, and that is what the church is.

So a time during which, on the basis of grace, people have been redeemed, have been joined to Christ, [00:18:01] have been called and taken out of this world, although we're here physically, but morally we don't belong to it, and belong to Christ, waiting for him to take them out of this world physically as well. Now, if you want to look at it this way, as a dispensation, you might say, well, actually it didn't last long until failure came in as well. It was a bright testimony in Acts 2 and 3 and 4, but in Acts chapter 5 already you have failure with Ananias and Sapphira, and then in chapter 6 with the murmuring about the distribution of funds, and so it went on until Christendom will end in complete failure and even apostasy.

But if God has taken people out of this course of the world, it doesn't mean that he has finished with the world and will not reach his objectives. [00:19:06] There is another dispensation, and I love this expression in Ephesians 1, where it is called the dispensation of the fullness of times. It's the

dispensation when it will be proved that although things went wrong every time before, one day things will be set right. God's plan, again Adam, man ruling over creation, will be fulfilled.

There will be the man after God's heart who will rule over this earth. It says several times in Revelation 20, I think Brother Ernie is going to tell us later how many times exactly, it says that this will be for a full period of a thousand years.

It will be a time of blessing, a time of justice, and a time of peace.

[00:20:08] Now just one word of caution here. If you think, well, at the end of that time man will really have improved. You know Satan is bound, will be bound during those thousand years, but after that Satan is going to be let loose briefly, and immediately people are gathered together from the ends of the earth, and they assemble together in order to attack the earthly capital of the reign of Christ, which is Jerusalem, and the answer is fire from heaven and judgment. Now you may or may not agree with the exact partition here, but I hope what we can all take away is marvel and admiration for the ways of God with man. You see, I think two things come out very clearly if you survey history in this way. [00:21:03] One is how bad and hopeless man is, and the other is how patient and how wonderful God is, and in the end God will be vindicated, Christ will be vindicated, the millennium will be a wonderful time, and it is so important to realize that it is literal.

It is a time when there will be blessing on this earth, and more importantly Christ will be recognized and vindicated in the place where he was rejected. It was here that he was nailed to the cross, and therefore it is here that God wants him to be honored and recognized.

Now this is the same sort of scheme graphically, perhaps a little easier to visualize these times of innocence, conscience, government, promise, law, [00:22:06] time of grace, or the spirit where the church is called out. We'll hear later, I'm sure, about the time of tribulation, and then the dispensation of the fullness of time, the reign of Christ on earth, and after that the eternal state.

I indicated earlier that you may not agree with all the details, and I might even offer you some modifications myself. The first one is if you want what we call dispensations one and two, innocence and conscience. Now there's a question whether you actually have to regard them as dispensations, whether they are dispensations in the full sense, whether something has been dispensed. [00:23:01] You might say, well, Adam was just innocent, and afterwards man just had a conscience, but it wasn't dispensed in that sense.

So you may come across that comment. Then we just mentioned the time of the church, or the time of grace, or the time of the nations. Well, there's a slight difficulty with calling this time the dispensation of the church, because the dispensations have to do with how God orders and governs and arranges things with regard to the course of this world.

Now, in a way, the church has nothing to do with that. The church has been called out of this world, and therefore is not really a dispensation as such. But what is important is to realize that, well, if we are called out of this world, we're certainly not part of a Jewish dispensation that relies on the law and on forms and on outward ceremonies, [00:24:04] but it is important to see that the church is completely different. Now, if you regard the church as outside the dispensations, well, you would say, with regard to this earth, what's special at this time? Well, there are two things. One is it's the time of Gentiles, as you find in Luke 21, where the relationship between God and his earthly people Israel is, you might

say, broken or interrupted, and the earth is given over to be ruled by the Gentiles. On the other hand, the other important thing is that there is the spirit of God who actually dwells on the earth. So these are two things that are characteristic for our time.

Now, then the time of the law.

Maybe I should have mentioned that before mentioning the church. You could think of a subdivision of that time of the law because there were some changes. [00:25:06] It started, of course, with Moses giving the law, but then there were new things introduced like God introducing the priesthood, and now you have the priesthood, if you like, between the people and God.

You then had the matter of royalty being introduced.

Suddenly there is a king. It was, of course, bad that Israel wanted a king to be like the nations, but God, in the end, uses it in his grace for blessing by giving an heir to David's throne.

But the point is that it's a different way of governing things. It's not God governing Israel immediately or God governing Israel through the priesthood, but now there is a king who is interposed, and that when a king does well, the people does well, and when a king did what was bad, it had bad consequences for the people. [00:26:06] So you could find these subdivisions for the time of the law. Now, if you agree with those alterations or modifications, then this is the scheme you would come up with, and you'll see on this slide, where you say, well, with Noah you have a clear start of a dispensation because God gives him the government. He dispenses government. He gives Noah a rule according to which the world should be ruled.

Abraham unchanged, time of promise. Israel subdivided, as just discussed, the law, the priesthood, the kings. Then you have the time of the Gentiles, which is also the time of the spirit. The church listed separately here as called out, being outside the dispensations. But then in the end, all being brought to a wonderful conclusion in the millennium, [00:27:01] in the dispensation of the fullness of times.

Now, perhaps you say, well, I find this a little confusing. I was hoping to get a clear answer today, and now we've got two schemes. Well, I haven't done this to confuse you, but perhaps a bit more to forewarn you that there are slight differences. But I do not think, I repeat, that this should discourage us in any way, because the main conclusions are the same.

If you just look at what's on this slide here, whether you believe in one scheme or the other, what is certainly clear is that the church is distinct from Israel. And that's really one of the tenets, one of the core points of dispensationalism, that you distinguish between God's earthly program and God's heavenly program. Between God's earthly people and God's heavenly people. And it's not that one has substituted or replaced the other. [00:28:04] It is not that the church is not the New Testament Israel, and Israel is not the Old Testament church.

There is Israel, and Israel is Israel. And there is the church, and the church is the church. And if we just read the Bible as it is written, it will not be that difficult. So the church is different from Israel. It's called out, it's heavenly, it's indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and it's linked with Christ as people have never been linked and associated with Christ in any different time. Israel, on the other hand, has a future on earth. It's dispersed all over the globe today, with the exception of a few million who are already in

Israel.

But I think there are still more Jews in America than in Israel.

[00:29:02] But they will possess Palestine, as much as this angers some of the neighboring nations. And they will dwell there in peace under the reign of Messiah.

Now just a few points by way of conclusion or summary. The first point, dispensations are not a doctrine but a framework that helps us to understand the Bible. And I think that's very important, especially with regard to these slight differences that exist. It's about terminology, it's about a framework, it's about a tool that helps us to read the Bible. Now you may say, well, too complicated for me. But I don't think so.

Because I am sure that everybody in this room, when you read your Bibles, you are using a dispensational approach. When you read in the Old Testament about animal sacrifices having been brought, now what do you do? [00:30:05] Do you say, oh, I've never done this, I need to rush out, I need to buy a lamb, and I need to kill it and sacrifice it. Well, of course you don't.

So you are reading the Bible with a dispensational approach, with the recognition that things are different in different times. It doesn't matter whether there are six dispensations or seven or eight. What does matter is that God deals with different people at different times in different ways. Now, some people attack God because of that. Somebody sent an email to Bible Center complaining bitterly about this. And he says, oh, God must have changed his mind. He must have invented a new religion every now and then. Well, God doesn't invent any religions. But God deals with different people at different times in different ways. And it was not in order to try out things. [00:31:03] It was just to try one thing, and that's man. And to prove that man is lost.

Man has failed under successive dispensation.

And this is why God sent Christ in pure grace. If you survey the failure in all these different schemes in the past, you can see how that it is only grace that can be used to help man. Point number five, it's vital to notice that there are different dispensations. Just remember the story of Mary, which I tried to tell you and borrowed from Mr. Ironside. Christians who do not understand dispensational differences will easily fall into error. Now, that's with regard to different areas of life, worship, politics, and many other things. And we'll have some extra sessions later on on the practical implications, the practical importance of dispensational teaching. [00:32:07] Point number six, you may say this is bold, but I believe it's true. Only with a dispensational outlook can the Bible be interpreted fully and consistently.

You'll hear later about one great or one very widespread, I don't want to call it great really, one very widespread alternative. Now, if you follow that alternative approach, you will find that you can't interpret everything consistently. You will find that you have to change the meanings of words. You will read Israel, and you have to understand it as church.

But the great thing about the dispensational approach is that you can approach the Bible, the word of God, consistently.

Point number seven, dispensational teaching vindicates God. [00:33:02] Terrible accusations have been leveled against God based on dispensational teaching. But if one looks at this properly, as I've

tried to show a little bit, you see how God is vindicated, how God is justified in his ways, if you understand what he has done in these different dispensations. My final point is dispensational teaching sees the glory of God as the ultimate aim, not merely the salvation of man. That's again a difference between those two systems. The other system thinks the most important thing ever is the salvation of man, and it is very important, and we praise God for it. But what is more important is the glory of God, and the dispensational approach shows that this actually is the ultimate objective. Now, when I wrote this last slide, I had forgotten one reference on Brother Hugh's slide, so it can be very quick now. [00:34:06] Brother Hugh has already brought this out, and I just close with the remark that I hope our reaction at the end of this conference to dispensational teaching will be Paul's reaction when he surveyed God's dispensational dealings with Israel.

Perhaps it bears reading again.

Oh, depth of riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God, how unsearchable his judgment and untraceable his ways. For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Or who has first given to him and then shall be rendered to him? For of him and through him and for him are all things.

To him be the glory forever.

Amen.