

Bible Basics Conference 2008: Dispensations

Part 6

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[00:00:00] Some here are probably too young to remember the old public telephones where you could press button A or press button B. I'm going to be pressing buttons here. Basically, if you connected and you wanted to speak to someone, you press button B. So there's a great temptation here to press button, instead of pressing button A and continuing with the conversation, to press button B and sit down and let others get on with it. Nevertheless, I've been roped in and in the Lord's mercy, we may be able to look at this subject of the covenants.

And first of all, I'd like to read from the Word of God, from the Old Testament or Old Covenant, first of all, and then briefly from the New Testament. First of all, in Jeremiah [00:01:04] chapter 31. And verse 31. Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, saith Jehovah, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, which my covenant they broke, although I was a husband unto them, saith the Lord. But this shall be the covenant [00:02:05] that I will make with the house of Israel. After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts and write it in their hearts and will be their God. And they shall be my people, and they shall teach no more every man his neighbor and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know me from the least of them unto the graces of them, saith the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more. And then in Hebrews chapter 13. And verse 20. Just these words, the God [00:03:16] of peace that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, the great shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the everlasting covenant. I expect that we all know something about covenants. At least we should all know something about covenants, because they're mentioned in the Word of God. And fairly frequently too, when we look at the subject in more detail.

And also, if we even take up our New Testament, it's the New Testament of our Lord and Savior [00:04:05] Jesus Christ. But some translators, in place of the word Testament, use the word covenant. So it's really the idea of an old covenant and of a new covenant that is enshrined in the two divisions of our Bibles. If William Tyndale, in translating the Bible into English, and the New Testament at least in modern times, if he perhaps had used the word covenant instead of Testament, we would be speaking of it as the New Covenant and turn to the New Covenant rather than turn to the New

Testament. Covenant and Testament are the same words essentially. It speaks of an agreement in the French Bible. It's the word alliance. It's an alliance that gives the significance of the word.

Now, there are two views of covenants. We can view covenants from a dispensational point of view, [00:05:04] or there is a system of belief, which is known as covenant theology. Covenant theology is held in the reformed circles by those who are more or less Calvinist. Now, the latest flavor of the month in speaking about dispensationalism, if you look around on the web and make certain inquiries, you'll very quickly be told, oh, but dispensationalism, it's only 170 years old. It was the creation or it was the brainwave of an Anglican minister by the name of John Nelson Darby. You would think from the way that it's spoken of that he wakened up one day and he pulled a verse from here and pulled a verse from there and took [00:06:06] something from somewhere else. And like the magician, he put it all in the hat and shook it around and voila, he pulled out the white rabbit, dispensational truth. Well, I think it was not like that at all. And I think we can show that the covenants and dispensational truth, which is the framework in which they fit in, is something which is clearly shown by the connection of the scriptures in the word of God, because no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. But actually it's a dangerous argument. And it's setting up a man of straw to say that dispensationalism is only 170 years old, because we come to inquire about covenant theology. And I'm reliably informed that, with apologies to our [00:07:09] Swiss brethren who may be with us here today, that covenant theology began with Caspar Olivianus in Switzerland in the 1500s. He lived from 1536 to 1587. So what's the difference of a belief system that's 170 years old and a belief system that's, say, 370 years old or 450 years old? Might as well say, well, where was that in the early church? And where has that been through all the centuries of the Christian era? In a sense, a couple of hundred years is not a big distinction. We could almost say that one system is as new as the other. But actually it's not important for us what was taught in the early church. If we want to go back to the early church [00:08:01] fathers, we wouldn't be here today. We'd be good Roman Catholics. The important question for us is what does the word of God say? And so we need to turn to the word of God, as we already have done.

Just before I do that, I'll just give the belief system of covenant theology. It speaks of God's dealings with mankind in history under the framework of three overarching theological covenants. Covenants of redemption, of works, and of grace. Then it amplifies it to speak of the covenant of redemption as the agreement to effect man's salvation, God the Father and God the Son, in that past expanse of eternity before the world was made, entered into an agreement or covenant. That was the covenant of redemption. And then with Adam and Eve, according to this system of teaching, there was a covenant of works. And because Adam and Eve sinned, then it was later [00:09:04] made known to man as the covenant of grace. So those are the three constituent elements of covenant theology. Covenant of redemption, covenant of works, covenant of grace. And so I'm telescoping the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace into one covenant. As I say, it was this Swiss theologian, Olivianus, through the Westminster Confession of Faith, it passed into the first mainstream English confession. It was held by such theologians as John Owen during Puritan times. It was held by Jonathan Edwards in New England, later by the Princeton Theological School, and today by such men as James Packer and R.C. Sproul.

So it is a very widely spread system of belief. But we have to ask the question, where in the word of God do we read of a covenant of redemption before the world, or even of a [00:10:04] covenant of works in Genesis chapters two and three? It's not mentioned, or of this covenant of grace. It's well described as theological covenants because that's what they are. They are theological covenants. They're something that comes from theology. They're not scriptural covenants, and there's no

scripture to back them up. So first of all, they're not scriptural. But also, does it really present God in a true light?

We know that there's that about God which is inscrutable, which is incomprehensible, which is beyond our finite minds, and we know that we can only know divine persons as and when they are revealed. But God is one in his essence and attributes. God in three persons. They're one in unity of nature and being. They're one in mind and purpose. So why would they ever need a covenant [00:11:07] between themselves whenever they essentially are God in being, in three persons, in complete agreement of mind and purpose? So I would suggest that covenant theology, not only is it not scriptural, but it's also, in a sense, it's really derogatory of a God, and it misrepresents God. So turning now from men's theories, we turn to the word of God. And we have a statement in Romans 9.3 which is helpful. Paul is speaking, he says, of his brethren. He says they're Israelites. He says certain things pertain to them, the adoption and the glory and the covenants. I'm giving up the law. The covenants. They belong to Israel and therefore earth. Keep earth in view, keep Israel in view, [00:12:07] and this gives us the proper framework in which to understand the covenant. Certainly we're not going to need any covenants in heaven. And it's quite clear if we read the previous verse. When Paul says Israelites, here he's speaking about his brethren according to the flesh. He's talking about his natural kith and kin. So covenants pertain to Israel and they have to do with the earth. What is a covenant? Galatians 3.15 tells us it's a binding agreement. To give a human example, brothers, even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls or adds to it once it has been ratified. That means if God has made a covenant and lays down certain conditions, we're not at liberty to spiritualize it or change the terms or add to it or to take from it. So a covenant [00:13:04] is binding. No one annuls or adds to it. It involves two parties. And Abraham made a covenant with Abimelech. Israel in a future day will make a covenant with death in hell. They'll enter into a nefarious agreement with the revived Roman empire for the purposes of protection. But we're not so much concerned with covenants on a human level this afternoon. We're concerned with covenants that God enters into. And I say with man, with mankind, with an individual, with a nation. There are two parties, God and men or varieties of men on the other side. And then another thing I want to note about the covenants is that they can be either conditional or unconditional. We will not have time to develop this in its entirety, but I think if we look at the Abrahamic covenant, we'll see that it was unconditional promises to Abraham. God does not go back on it. The gifts and calling [00:14:06] of God are without repentance. That means if God decides on a certain course of action, he's not going to change his mind. So there are unconditional covenants. But when we come to the giving of the law, we find it's a different situation because they're Israel covenant. They entered into an agreement with God to keep certain terms, which they were not able to do. And so of course, that covenant failed. And it's referred to in scripture as the first covenant. It's not the first historically, but it's the first with Israel as such. And it's the first as in contrast with the later with the new covenant, it's the old covenant and the new covenant. And there's a lot to be learned by contrasting these two things. Another point in connection with covenants, I think we'll maybe have time to illustrate is that subsequent covenants generally embody the principles of preceding covenants. In other words, there's a succession. [00:15:05] One adds to the other and there's a forward movement and a continuity.

William Kelly, as a young man, in one of his early writings in the first magazine, he edited The Prospect, wrote an article on the mystery and the covenants. And the covenants will find, carry right through from Genesis, right through to the book of Malachi, from the days of Noah, even right through to the new covenant with Israel and Judah, which will be in a future day. So the covenants carry along. But the mystery, we'll be hearing about the mystery in the love of the Lord. The church is a mystery. The mystery was something hid from ages and generations. The mystery was hidden God.

It was not revealed onto the sons of men until the time of Paul and [00:16:04] particularly in his prison epistles. So there is a continuity of God's earthly dealings, the covenants. But then in the new Testament, we have this mystery, this truth as to the heavenly character of the assembly. These truths which center around God's heavenly peoples, those who are joined to the Lord as the body is joined to the head. And this represents something which was hidden and which was previously unrevealed and to which there's no continuity. We were standing at the train station last night, somewhat later than we anticipated, actually. And they announced over the tannoy, please stand back. It's an express train. It's going through and it's going through very quickly. So we had to allow a margin of safety. But if it was just a one line, one track system with the upline and the downline, and suppose there'd been the standard passenger [00:17:03] chain at the platform and the express train was coming, well, what would happen? Well, the standard passenger train would have to be shunted into the siding in order to let the express train through. And I think it's a bit like that with the word of God and with the assembly. You've got the covenant, you've got God's earthly purposes, you've got what he's carrying out, these agreements that he's committed himself to. And then at a certain point, room is made for the church, those believers from Pentecost to the rapture. And then once they're caught up again, the express train, so to speak, has run through and God is going to revert to his earthly purposes. And these covenants then will find their fulfillment literally and in actuality.

Well, now, we haven't time to, you've probably been looking at them as I've been speaking and you may have liked or wish to copy down the relevant scriptures. But I count here, I think [00:18:06] a nine, that there may be some overlap, the new covenant. I think it's fairly clear in Hebrews 13, that the everlasting covenant is equivalent to the new covenant. But everlasting covenant is a term that's used of the other covenants also. It's used of the Noachic covenant, for example. And there's one there, there's a covenant of peace in Ezekiel 37 verse 26, which I haven't got in. So that would make 10 covenants. 10 covenants in the word of God, which covenant theology doesn't even touch upon, doesn't even speak about. Instead, they introduce three covenants, which don't have any basis in the word of God or any specific, any direct scripture, any mention of them as a covenant as such. There are certain elements in covenants. They suppose and are consequent on some intervention of God. They give the terms or conditions in which God can be with man or with the nation at any given moment. They're in order [00:19:05] that the benefits of God's intervention may be enjoyed and a covenant sets forth God's dispensation, disposition, sets forth his attitude towards the people. So to go back to Romans 3, to go back to Romans 3, verse 3 of chapter 9, that the language used in covenants is very straightforward. It's easily comprehensible. There's no special system of interpretation in dispensationalism. It follows on what is known as the historical grammatical principle of hermeneutic principle of interpretation. The Protestant system of interpretation, it differs from the spiritualizing or the allegorizing which characterized the early centuries. And it differs from the school men in medieval times who wanted [00:20:04] to work out how many angels could dance on a pinhead and things like that. The way of interpreting the word of God, which we'll speak about a little bit more, is look at it in its grammatical connection, look at it in its historical context. If it's poetic language, you may expect it not to be literal. But it comes down to this. If the literal sense makes good sense, seek no other sense in case it makes nonsense. It means that you read it intelligently and take it and what it says in its plain meaning. If the literal sense makes good sense, seek no other sense in case it makes nonsense. People talk about dispensationalism and they say, oh, it's grasshopper exegesis and you're just jumping over the scriptures. It's almost as if J.N. Darby was in his day to Bible teaching what Bill Gates and the [00:21:03] Windows operating system is to computers today. You cut and paste and you put a whole system together. It's not a question of extracting certain bits of truth and putting them together in a specific way. It's a matter of taking the word of God in its literal sense and in its totality and looking at the complete picture. So Romans 3 helps us to see clearly what's

involved. And then when we come to the covenants with Noah, it's actually with the earth and it's with mankind. The point there is, essentially, while the earth remaineth, seed time and harvest and cold and heat and summer and winter and day and night shall not cease. God gave his sign in the cloud, he gave the rainbow, he made his covenant with Noah that he was no more going to destroy the earth. And that's a wonderful truth. No one in Moscow is going to press the red button and send the world into self-destruct.

[00:22:10] No one at CERN in Switzerland with these colliders or colanders or whatever are going to create a black hole that's going to swallow us all up. This world is not going to be hit by a meteor. It's not going to be blasted out of existence. God says it's going to continue right through until the reign of Christ, until the day of the Lord. And during that period in the which it'll be dissolved, it'll be burnt up with fire in preparation for the new heaven and new earth. This world so minute in the whole solar system is yet it's the theater. It's the stage on which God is working out his moral ways and for the glory of Christ. The world's not always going to remain the plaything of the devil. It's not always going to be the devil's toy. God will assert his rights in Christ. Here on this earth, there will be the victory of grace. [00:23:06] There will be the victory over death. Satan will be bruised under Christ's feet. Mankind will be brought into blessing. This covenant with Noah, the rainbow recurs in Ezekiel and in Revelation. It shows that the earth is the stage on which God is operating. The Abrahamic covenant builds on that. They gave me a big subject this afternoon. I can't really do justice to it. The Abrahamic covenant promised blessing to Abraham, promised blessing to his descendants. It promised geographical boundaries. I think it's in Genesis 15 that we have the boundaries of the land right at the close where it says, I've made a covenant in addition to the scripture I've highlighted in Genesis 17 from the river of Egypt onto the great river, the river [00:24:03] Euphrates. The only time ever they had that was in a limited sense under Solomon.

Even then, a large part of it was desert. Prophets tell us that in the future day, the desert will bloom as a rose and that it'll be a proper country. This will be all under Abraham's seed because it says, in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed. Not seeds as of many, but seed as of one. Paul brings that out in the New Testament. Speaking not of Isaac, it goes beyond Abraham and Isaac and Jacob to whom it was promised to Abraham and to his seed, but it centers in Christ as the seed of Abraham. How blessed a thing that is to contemplate. Abraham, Israel, the descendants of Abraham will be in the land without any enemies.

They'll have the possession, geographical possession. He'll be the father of many nations. I presume that's through Ishmael and that's the Arab nations, but there'll be blessing [00:25:02] not only to him and to his seed, but all the nations of the earth will be blessed through. That was the blessing under Christ in a future day. That covenant is recurred to numerous occasions of the Old Testament because God has committed himself unconditionally to carry out certain purposes. At Sinai, we know that it's referred to as a covenant in Jeremiah in chapter 24 of Exodus.

God says, here's my law. People didn't know their own hearts, their own weaknesses, their own sinfulness, and they said, all that the Lord has spoken, we will do. So that covenant was broken. The Levitical covenant is really with the house of Levi, a perpetual priesthood and with Phinehas. Deuteronomic covenant, Palestinian covenant is interesting because we've already referred to the preceding chapters. It's an interesting thing that the blessings in chapter 28 are contained in about the first 14 verses [00:26:05] of a chapter that has 65 verses. So about 40 verses, I mean, there are some descriptive, I'm not giving a precise breakdown. There are descriptive verses as well, but we might say 14 verses of blessings, but 40 verses of curses. Some of you young men can go and look it

up and analyze it and give the precise figures on it. That's a pretty clear indication that in regard to keeping the law and blessing as a result of law keeping that they were going to fail because the curses greatly surpassed and extended beyond the blessings. And then subsequently upon that, God tells about what he's going to do in chapter 30 of Deuteronomy and how he'll bring them into that. And it supposes pestilence. It supposes disease coming upon them. It supposes captivity. It supposes subjection to their enemies. All these things were to come upon them, [00:27:05] which mirror the literal nation of Israel's actual history. And that shall come to pass.

Then God says, after these things, I will do certain things and you'll return to me and I'll turn your captivity. They'll be gathered in the land and they will be blessed. The Davidic covenant narrows it down. It's not just the seed of Abraham, but it's the seed of David and a sure covenant. And it speaks of Solomon, but we know that the scriptures in 2 Samuel 7 are taken up in Hebrews and applied to Christ. So all these scriptures point forward to Christ. And this is true, particularly of, we haven't time to look at them all. This is true, particularly of the new covenant, because when Jeremiah was writing, it could only have been future. He said, I'll make a covenant with Israel and with Judah. [00:28:03] Israel was carried into captivity by the Assyrians and Judah at a later stage by the Babylonians to Babylon and the 10 tribes and the two tribes have had a separate history subsequently. But in a future day, God says, he'll make this covenant both with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. And under the terms of the new covenant, they will be brought into blessing. And I certainly believe that this will have a literal fulfillment in a future day in keeping with God's dispensational dealings. So, I mean, the interventions of God with Noah, it was a flood with Abraham. It was the call God's call out of the earth. That was the intervention. Then God said, walk before me and be perfect. I'm God almighty. There was election. There was the call of grace with the Sinaitic covenant. The intervention of God was when he brought them out of Egypt. And we can trace it right down, all these different events. And of course, the new [00:29:06] covenant is based on the greatest event of all in human history. We read about the blood of the everlasting covenant. It's consequent on the death of Christ and Israel in a future day will be brought into this blessing Israel and Judah. But now, what about the relation of the new covenant to the church? Well, now, I don't know whether they're going to give me an extra session on this, but this is a very interesting question. Are we blessed without a covenant? Well, in its strict literality, there's no question that the house, that the new covenant will be ratified with Israel and with Judah. But at the same time, the new covenant has a great place in the New Testament. It's mentioned in six books, is it not? And it's mentioned extensively in the book of Hebrews in chapter eight and chapter 10 and chapter 12 and in chapter 13. Hebrews was written. It's not like [00:30:07] the epistle of James written to the 12 tribes. Hebrew was written to Christian believers from amongst the Jews who had embraced the faith of Christianity. They'd professed the faith of Christianity. So, it was written to a Christian company and it says there that we come to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant. In the gospels, on each occasion in which the cup is mentioned at the Lord's supper, it's spoken of as the cup of the new covenant, which is shed for many. And you might say, well, that's in the context of Israel and that's in the upper room. And so it is, but in the gospel of Luke, which is more towards the Gentiles, it says it's the cup of the new covenant, which is shed for you. And when Paul comes to reiterate the truth in 1 Corinthians [00:31:01] 11 from heaven, he speaks of it. This cup is the new testament in my blood. This do we as oft as you drink it in remembrance of me. The cup which he gave us to drink in remembrance of himself is the new covenant in his blood. And I do think, if we were more established in the truth of the new covenant, our meetings wouldn't fall flat so much after the breaking of bread, where we just have a hymn or a prayer, or we send the box around and close the meeting. Surely the new and a proper appreciation of the new covenant insofar as the blessings of the new covenant are now enjoyed by the assembly in a spiritual way would help us in regard to approach to God the father and an

approach to worship. Their sins and iniquities will I remember no more that we read in Jeremiah, in whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins in Israel. And Judith says the law will be written on our heart in second Corinthians [00:32:07] three, Paul speaks of the new covenant ministry. There are four great ministries of Paul in Colossians one, he speaks himself as minister of the, of the gospel of which I minister, which preached to the whole creation under heaven. He speaks of the church of which I made a minister. He's minister of the assembly. Those two we're very familiar with, but there are two other ministries in second Corinthians in chapter three, there's the ministry of the new covenant ministry. And in chapter five, there's the ministry of reconciliation. These are, would be great subjects to take up, but in second Corinthians chapter three, Paul says of himself that he's a minister of the new covenant, not of the letter, but of the spirit. So what Israel will have in the letter in a future day, we can enjoy now in a spiritual way, [00:33:08] because we are one with the mediator of the covenant and his blood, the blood of the covenant is the blood under which we also are sheltered and redeemed the blessings of the new covenant. The church enjoys because we are one with him who is the mediator. I think that's the important point. We come into these blessings because we're one with Christ. We're one with the mediator. And as I say, we have forgiveness of sins. We have the knowledge of God, perhaps even in a greater way than Israel has. This is life eternal to know they the only true God in Jesus Christ, whom thou has sent. They will have a knowledge of God in a future day. Today we have the knowledge of the father and the son and that day to come, they will all be taught of God. And surely today in the Holy spirit's power, we are also taught of God. We're taught of Christ and we're taught of the father. And the other thing is where they will have the law written on their hearts in the [00:34:04] future day. The spirit of God is writing Christ on our hearts. There's that subjective ministry. There's that formative power by which the spirit of God impresses Christ on our hearts, not with ink. It's by the spirit of the living God through Christ and through the spirit. And then it goes on to say, Paul says he's enabled minister of the new covenant, not of the letter, but of the spirit. And there's a little parenthesis in the, in that chapter. And you jump on to chapter two, verse 17. And it says, now the Lord is the spirit. And I noticed in Mr. Darby's French translation, the spirit there has a small S the Lord is the spirit, the spirit of all scripture, just like, because he's the subject of all scripture as on the road to Emmaus beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he expounded onto them and all the scriptures, the things concerning himself. Scriptures are all about Christ. He's the spirit of the scriptures. He's the spirit of the covenant. [00:35:04] And we're introduced to this. So there are mentions of the new covenant or the new in the new Testament. And while we are blessed without a literal covenant being made with us, we certainly can come into the enjoyment of these things, which are spoken about in the covenant. So just to sum up, then there's no covenant of grace in the Bible. We've shown that we've talked about the way that the covenant with Abraham was on conditional and we'll have literal fulfillment according to the normal sense of language and the passages we've been revving. We've spoken about the Sinaitic covenant being broken. We've looked in some detail at the new covenant, which is also on conditional. And we've seen that the covenant is not made with the church, but that we enjoy the blessings. We know the value of the blood of Christ. It's the basis on which God will work. It's been the basis of all God's ways. And in a future day, Paul says, so all Israel [00:36:03] will be saved. They'll come through the time of Jacob's trouble. We'll come through great tribulation, but the covenant will be made with them. And if you study what the word of God actually says about covenants, it certainly supports the dispensational view.