

Bible Basics Conference 2008: Dispensations

Part 7

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[00:00:00] Perhaps it might be appropriate just to commend for the next hour to God briefly in prayer.

God and our Father, we would take this time to give you thanks once more for this occasion to be able to hopefully have a fuller understanding of your dealings with mankind. We thank you for what's been presented to us already and for those who have presented these things to us. And we do again look to you for guidance for the remainder of this conference and this session in particular. So we do commit ourselves and the reading and study of your word into your care. And we do this in Jesus' name. Amen.

One of the potential dangers in the study that we've got for this weekend in looking at dispensations is that we might fall into talking of dispensationalism, [00:01:03] talking of what dispensationalists teach or what a dispensationalist believes. I don't think we've fallen into that danger or into that trap yet. But as our brother Andrew made clear in the previous session, what we're looking at this weekend is not a man-made doctrine.

It's not something that you find in a textbook. It's not something that you need to subscribe your name to, as you might to the many political doctrines of this world, Marxism or something like that. What we are studying is what is presented in God's word, the Bible.

Having just made that remark, there are many Christians, faithful Christians, who come to a different view of God's dealings with man.

And again, our brother Andrew went through one of the alternative approaches, that of covenant theology. These people would purport to base their approach on the Bible as well.

[00:02:03] So the purpose of this session is to set out the proper way in which we should interpret the Bible. And hopefully we'll see that doing this leads to the view that God has dealt with man in various dispensations, as has already been presented to us and as will be presented to us over the rest of the weekend. So just what we hope to get through in this session, look at the problem. And then to look briefly at what is the Bible.

And then to move on to how we should interpret the Bible. We might briefly mention what I've called some unhelpful approaches to interpreting the Bible. But then we'll come on to one particular issue of biblical interpretation that's pertinent to this weekend, and that is distinguishing between Israel and the church. And then, time permitting, we might just look at a few passages that at first glance might appear difficult. [00:03:06] So the issue of what we're dealing with.

I might start by reading some verses from Genesis chapter 12.

This is God's promise to Abraham.

Genesis chapter 12, starting at verse 1. The Lord said unto Abraham, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee, and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great. And thou shalt be a blessing, and I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee. And in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed. So Abraham departed as the Lord had spoken to him. Just jumping down to verse 7. And the Lord appeared unto Abraham and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land. [00:04:01] I'll leave the reading there.

Those verses are perhaps well known to most of us here. But imagine for a moment that you were giving those verses to somebody who'd never read the Bible before. And you didn't give them your Bible, but you just copied those verses onto a blank sheet of paper, gave them to your friend to read, and asked your friend what they thought those verses meant.

I suspect that the answer would be that God was giving a promise to Abraham that Abraham would be the father of a great nation and be blessed, and that his descendants would be given the land that God told him to go to. That would be the ordinary interpretation of those verses of God's promises there.

God's made a range of promises to Israel.

[00:05:01] I've listed some of them there.

We unfortunately don't have time to go through them all. But again, some explicit promises to Israel and promises that would be encouraging to Israel as well.

God's promises were expressed to last forever.

This gives rise to the question then, did God intend his promises to be taken literally? Or if that's not the case, has God stopped dealing with Israel, perhaps because of their unfaithfulness, and these promises have now been given to another group of people, perhaps particularly the Church, for them to be fulfilled? It's the distinction between those two, or difference between those two interpretations, that's really the focus of this session. God's promises to Israel, were they literal promises? Are they going to be fulfilled in the ordinary way that we would read them? [00:06:03] Or have they now been given to the Church?

Just before we come to that particular question, I just want to say a few words about what the Bible is, because I think it helps us understand the right way to interpret it.

These things that are mentioned here on this slide are fundamental, and I'm sure they're well known. The Bible is divinely inspired, was written under the power of the Holy Spirit, and it contains God's words to us. In 1 Corinthians 2.13, Paul, referring to his own writings, describes them as the words which the Holy Ghost teacheth.

I think it's important to note that the Bible's very words are inspired of God. Again, Paul's words, the words which the Holy Ghost teacheth.

The Bible isn't just a series of concepts or principles.

[00:07:06] Obviously, there are concepts and principles in there, but the Bible's words are absolutely important.

With that in mind, it might give us a help as to how we should interpret the Bible when we read it, remembering that it contains God's own words.

The method of interpretation that I'm going to describe is often referred to as the literal interpretation of the Bible. It's perhaps not the best way to describe it for a reason which I'll come to in a moment, but it's the label that it's often given to it, and it's the label that you would find if you were to turn to a book on dispensationalism. The so-called literal interpretation means, and our brother Andrew's covered this briefly, that we need to give God's words, the words in the Bible, their natural and ordinary meaning. [00:08:04] They're God's words speaking to us. It doesn't seem unlikely that God is going to speak to us in a hidden language, or while the Bible may contain parts that are difficult for us to understand, it's not God's intention to hide anything from us or describe things in such a way that we have to look for a hidden meaning.

We should give God's words their natural meaning. This doesn't mean that we don't have metaphors and other figures of speech.

Plenty of examples for this.

The Lord, or John rather, describes the Lord as the light of the world. Now we don't take that description literally as in the Lord was a physical light. We understand that it's a metaphor of what he was presenting, presenting everything that was right and good. [00:09:04] So when we do interpret the Bible, we have to take account of metaphors and figures of speech. We also have to take account of context. We can't just pull a few words out of the Bible, but we have to look at them as they appear. The reason why I said literal interpretation perhaps isn't the best way to describe this method of interpreting the Bible is that it isn't a literal interpretation because we do take account of metaphors and other figures of speech. Perhaps we might want to call it the natural interpretation of the Bible or the ordinary interpretation of the Bible. Interpreting the Bible in this way becomes particularly important when we get to the topic of prophecy.

A lot of Old Testament prophecies have been fulfilled literally. A good example is the verse that's mentioned here, which is a prophecy of the place of our Lord's birth, Bethlehem. [00:10:04] That's been fulfilled to the letter and there are many other examples of Old Testament prophecies being fulfilled as we would expect them on their ordinary meaning.

I said before that the Bible is not always easy to interpret and I think everyone here would agree with

that. We have the Holy Spirit to help us and the Lord's promise is that the Holy Spirit can reveal to us all things. That's not to say, though, that what's often referred to as spiritualizing or trying to find a spiritual meaning in things is a biblical concept. It's not.

Again, particularly in the context of prophecy, we have to look at and interpret prophecy on its ordinary meaning and not look for some hidden meaning. I don't want to spend too much time on the negative side of things or what we shouldn't do.

[00:11:04] I'll just mention here a couple of perhaps unhelpful approaches when interpreting the Bible. This one here begins in the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, which I assume means the current dispensation. Our guide is the scriptures of God in their broad outlines. Well, I think we could stop there and already recognize that this is wrong. We don't just, as I mentioned before, look for concepts and principles in the Bible. It's not just a recitation of those. It's God's very words.

So anything where it's suggested to us that we can ignore the words of the Bible is obviously incorrect. And the particular verse that's relied upon there, the letter that killeth, is an example of picking a few words and taking them out of context. Because those particular words are not the Bible condemning itself. Obviously, it's illustrating a contrast between law and the gospel.

[00:12:04] Another one which I found, which might sound attractive at first, is that we understand words in the words of the Bible in a literal sense first, then in a figurative sense if the literal doesn't make sense. It might sound attractive. It might sound reasonable at first. But, again, it involves doing away with God's words.

If it all becomes too hard, then we can turn to a figurative meaning of things. And this method of interpretation leads to some strange results. And I just mentioned a couple there. People who rely on this method of interpreting the Bible come to the conclusion that the rapture, perhaps one of the things that we as Christians should hold most dearly, doesn't have any scriptural support. And the reference in Revelation to there being two witnesses during the tribulation somehow symbolizes churches and not individuals.

[00:13:06] And the people who come to this conclusion skip over the fact that Revelation 11.9 refers to dead bodies, the dead bodies of these witnesses, which doesn't really fit if the witnesses just symbolize churches. Perhaps the most difficult thing about this approach is where does one draw the line? When does it become too hard to interpret things in a literal sense such that we have to go to a figurative sense? I mentioned before that the interpretation of prophecy, in respect of which it's important to have a proper interpretation of the Bible, and also in distinguishing between Israel and the church.

[00:14:01] Dispensationalism isn't fitting a system onto the Bible, but rather it's what one sees from the distinctions which the Bible itself draws in its own words. As I mentioned before, and as has been alluded to, there are many Christians who would believe that the prophecies given to Israel in the Old Testament that haven't been fulfilled are going to be fulfilled, but not with respect to Israel, but rather in some spiritual way with respect to the church. These people would claim that there's New Testament support for this view, that a lot of New Testament references to Israel are really references to the church, that the church has somehow subsumed Israel or taken the place of Israel as God's favoured people. But if we again take a literal approach to the Bible, we have to recognise that different words are used throughout the Bible for Israel and the church, and that the words are

never used interchangeably. [00:15:11] This verse is a good example of Israel and the church being distinct. 1 Corinthians 10.32 tells us to give no offence to the Jews, the Gentiles or the church of God.

The command there isn't to not give offence to the whole world or to not give offence to the church and everybody else, but to three particular groups, Jews, Gentiles and church of God. So the Bible uses distinct terminology for Israel and the church, and the reason for this is that Israel and the church are different. This isn't an exhaustive list of the differences between the two, and some of these differences are going to be the subject of later discussions this weekend. [00:16:04] But Israel had a different beginning. Its beginning was with Abraham. The church is a mystery hid in God.

That's from Ephesians chapter 3, and it had its beginning on the day of Pentecost that we have recorded in Acts 2. Its beginning had nothing to do with Abraham.

We also see a difference between the hope that Israel has and the hope that the church has. Israel looks to blessing in the land that was promised to Abraham. The verses that are mentioned there from Jeremiah 32 say, So that's Israel's hope that concerns their land on earth. [00:17:01] But our hope as Christians is very different. We have the hope of the rapture to heaven and always to be with our Lord.

As I said, this isn't an exhaustive list, and perhaps when you go to Bible Centre to download this weekend's slides, you might also want to print out an article by Mr Schofield called Jew, Gentile and Church of God. It quite helpfully draws out many of the differences between Israel and the church. Coming back to Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel, Israel understood God's promises in a literal sense.

To take the example of Luke 24, it's the disciples on the road to Emmaus. They were disappointed because the Old Testament prophecies hadn't been fulfilled literally. [00:18:02] Importantly, there was never any suggestion to Old Testament believers, even by the Lord himself, that looking for a literal fulfillment of God's promises was wrong.

In Acts 1, we have these words of the Lord.

Starting in verse 6, we have the words of his disciples. So they're asking again, is now going to be the literal fulfillment of the promises to Israel? The Lord's response to them in Acts 1-7 is, it is not for you to know the times or the seasons which the Father has put in his own power. Note there that the Lord doesn't say to them that you should stop looking for a literal fulfillment of these prophecies. [00:19:03] He doesn't say that the church has replaced Israel or this new thing, the church that's going to be created is going to have the blessing of all of the promises to Israel. But rather his statement is, it's not for you to know the times and seasons. And implicit in that is that the promises will be fulfilled literally one day in the future.

And that's supported by some of the Lord's words on this earth, when he said that he came not to destroy the law but to fulfill it and so on.

And we might remember that some Old Testament prophecies have been fulfilled literally. We had an example of that earlier. And I think it's right to say that every unfulfilled Old Testament prophecy will be fulfilled in the same way. That is literally.

So the end result of all of that is that when we're looking at the Bible and we see a reference to Israel, it means Israel. [00:20:06] Similarly if we read about the church, then that's what we're looking at, the church. We shouldn't confuse the two and in particular shouldn't think that references to Israel somehow now mean the church. There are some difficult passages, however, and perhaps got a few minutes to look at some of them. In Romans chapter 4, there's the statement that Abraham is the father of all them that believe.

From looking at this verse and the surrounding verses, one might think that the statement that Abraham is the father of all who believe means that all believers form part of one family.

[00:21:03] And so as a result of that, what's said about Israel in the Old Testament must now apply to the church because they all form part of the same family. You've got this common father, Abraham. I don't think it necessarily follows, however, that because we have a common father that we all have the same future.

Or that where Israel and the church are now being dealt with in the same way.

I think it's reading too much into that verse to conclude that Israel and the church are the same or that the church has now taken the place of Israel. There are various ways that we can understand the word father. And I think the reference to Abraham being the father of all them that believe is really a statement that Abraham is the originator or the one who establishes what Paul is discussing in these verses. [00:22:08] And that is justification through faith. Abraham was the first example of that. And we are justified by faith just as Abraham was justified by faith.

But he was the originator. The reference I've given to Isaiah chapter 9 perhaps isn't the best one. But it perhaps illustrates the point there in the JND translation. We have the statement that the Lord will be in the millennium the father of eternity. And what that really means is that he's the one who establishes or calls into being that time. So he's the one who brings that into being. So we can, I think, read this verse in a similar sense.

That Abraham is the first one who gives us an example of justification through faith. [00:23:03] Chapter 4 of Romans distinguishes between the content of Abraham's faith and ours. In verse 24, verse 21, sorry, we read that Abraham believed that God would perform his promise that he would raise life out of what was effectively dead. But in verse 24, we have faith in a finished work, the finished work of the Lord Jesus. So there is a distinction drawn in this very chapter between Israel and the Church.

This next one I'll skip over because it's essentially the same thing. The children of Abraham, again, this verse doesn't say that Israel and the Church are one. In Galatians chapter 6, there's this statement at the end of the chapter, Peace be upon them and upon the Israel of God.

[00:24:01] One might note that one of the important teachings of Galatians is that there's no longer any distinction between Jew and Gentile. And we have that in these very verses that are mentioned on the slide. One might try and conclude from that that the reference to the Israel of God must be a reference to the Church. And extrapolating from that, that every reference to Israel in the New Testament can be a reference to the Church. But if we do look at those verses, we see that Galatians makes it clear that the absence of any distinction between Jew and Gentile concerns those in Christ Jesus.

Verse 15 is, For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything nor uncircumcision. So that absence of distinction only applies to the Church. The distinction between Israel and the Church still remains. [00:25:01] And I would suggest that here, the reference to Israel is a reference to Israel. Perhaps in illustration of the point that the Bible is sometimes difficult to interpret, there might be different approaches to this expression, the Israel of God. Perhaps it does mean Israelites who have become believers, who have become part of the Church. My own view is that it is a reference to Israel. At the beginning of the part that's quoted at the top of the slide, Paul is giving a benediction of peace be upon them, peace be upon believers. And the end is, and upon Israel.

And we know from Romans that Paul had a great love for Israel, for his kinsmen. And my own view is that he's just repeating that here, that he's seeking peace to be upon Israel, even if they're not believers, but just because he has such a love for his own people. [00:26:01] But in any event, it's clear that there remains a distinction between Israel and the Church. One last passage to look at is from Romans 9.

There are a few verses in that chapter which might be relied upon to suggest that God has broken down all distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, or between Israel and the nations.

A couple of them are quoted there. They are not all Israel which are of Israel. And then in verse 25, God saying that he will call them his people who are not his people.

So it could be said that the Church has replaced Israel as God's chosen people. But this is perhaps an example of where we need to look at things in context, because chapters 9 through to 11 of Romans, in fact, deal with dispensational distinctions. [00:27:02] In the chapter that we've got, verse 6 is distinguishing between faithful and non-faithful Israelites.

And verse 25 is just an example of God's sovereign choice in showing grace to people who are or who were not his people on this earth.

In chapter 11, we see that God still has plans for Israel.

We read there that Israel has been made blind and has been replaced, if you like, by the Gentiles in terms of who God is showing favor to at the moment.

But that doesn't last forever. In the verse that's quoted at the bottom of the slide, it's only until the fullness of the Gentiles, only until this current dispensation. It's implicit in this verse that's quoted there, that there still is a future for Israel. [00:28:06] So again, this passage can't properly support the contention that the Church has replaced Israel. So just to summarize where we've got to, Israel was God's chosen people in Old Testament times.

And because they were, and because God loved them, God made a number of promises to them. The Church is something entirely different.

It wasn't known at all in Old Testament times. It was a mystery, something that was created after the Lord was resurrected and rose to heaven. And it has a heavenly hope.

During this current dispensation, Israel has been set aside because of their unfaithfulness. But Israel has not been set aside forever. After the rapture of the Church, we might say the prophetic clock will

resume. [00:29:04] And God will resume dealing with Israel in literal fulfillment of the promises that he made to them.

These last couple of points on the slide, I think, are very important. God spoke to Old Testament believers.

He also spoke to them through prophets. And they made predictions about the future. And the people who received God's words, or the prophets' words, understood them literally. Again, to go back to the verses about Abraham.

Abraham no doubt understood that he was going to be taken to a particular land, a particular portion of this earth. And that one day that was going to be given to his descendants. That was the way that God's promises were understood. I'm sure we all recognize that God is faithful and he keeps his promises. [00:30:02] If we were to suggest that any of his promises should now be interpreted in a different way, as perhaps applying to us, then we're effectively making God a liar. And it is quite a serious thing. Because it means that when he gave his promises to Old Testament believers, that in fact he didn't really mean them in the way that those people understood them. Perhaps just to finish with a couple of points.

Why is all of this important?

It's not just so that we can understand dispensations correctly and be able to number them all and so on.

Errors as to prophecy often lead to errors as to the Christian's place in this world.

Relying on a misapplication of prophecy, many people, many Christians for example, might try to establish peace on this earth. [00:31:04] Because they read that a time of peace is coming. But in fact a proper appreciation of prophecy makes it clear that the time of peace will only come when our Lord comes and reigns over this earth. He's the only one who can establish peace. A more general application.

Why is this important?

If we genuinely have a desire for the Bible and desire to put into truth principles such as we have in Psalm 119, that the Bible should be a lamp unto our feet, then we need to have a proper appreciation and understanding of the Bible. And so we do need to understand it in its literal or natural sense so that we can apply it properly to our lives.

But perhaps a final application returning to the focus of this weekend and it's the last point on this slide. [00:32:03] The church is heavenly and has a heavenly hope.

That is each of us here, our true place is in heaven and our true hope is a heavenly hope. If we start confusing Israel and the church, then we lose the hope of what is before us.

We rob Israel of its blessings but perhaps more seriously we rob ourselves of the many wonderful hopes and promises that God has given to us in his word.