

Bible Basics Conference 2008: Dispensations

Part 9

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[00:00:00] Ephesians chapter 3 to begin with.

Ephesians chapter 3 verse 1.

For this cause I pull the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles, if you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you would, how that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery, as I wrote afore in few words, whereby when you read you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ, which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the [00:01:01] Spirit, that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs and of the same body and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel, whereof I was made a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power, unto me who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ, to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, according to the [00:02:02] eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him.

No doubt we'll refer back to those verses as we go through the presentation. The church and her hope. Now when each of us were preparing our slides I'm sure we were thinking well I need to say this and I need to say that to put my presentation in context but of course others were preparing slides for their subjects too and some of the things that I've put in my slides don't really have to be dwelt on for very long because they've already been spoken about. The church and our subject which is the dispensations. God works out his purpose in different ways at different times. We've seen that. We call those ways dispensations, literally household arrangements but all this has been mentioned already so [00:03:05] I won't spend a lot of time on it. The present dispensation and I know that we've wondered whether we can call this present time a dispensation in the same sense as the other times in which God has wrote his will in this world but for the sake of simplicity we're just regarded as a dispensation to involves the church. Now I'm using the term church because that's the one we

normally use but I'm sure most if not all of you here are aware that there's a better word for the original word in the Bible which is ecclesia, called out ones, the assembly and we're going to refer to that in a moment. But of course one of the things we can say about this present time, this present household arrangement is that it involves [00:04:01] the church and this is a very precious subject for all of us, the church, the assembly of God. Now the church isn't a dispensation but intimately connected with one and we've just mentioned that. Sometimes people wonder what my pictures mean. I hope that they convey something of the subject but I'm trying to convey here that this one is very special and that might be conveyed by the orange step. Other dispensations as we've seen already have a lot to do with human relationships, couples, Adam and Eve, families, Abraham and his descendants, not forgetting Noah and his family, nations, the people of Israel. But in this day we have a very different arrangement. The membership of the church is based on a [00:05:07] personal relationship with the Lord Jesus. Israel was under the dealings and blessings and discipline of God. But for that to happen you just had to be born an Israelite. You might be ever so profane and disobedient to God in your own life but you were still under the terms of God's relationship with Israel. That isn't the case today. To benefit from what we're speaking about today you must have a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus. It means trusting him only for salvation. No one else and nothing else. And that's because of his work upon the cross of Calvary. And grace characterizes the dispensation that we're in today. It's a wonderful word. We've already had it spoken about a number of times. [00:06:08] We've thought about it as the riches of God at Christ's expense. And the church is the fruit of God's grace. Remember the Lord Jesus likened himself to the corn of wheat falling into the ground. He died falling into the judgment as it were of God. But from his death there has come much fruit for God and we're part of that fruit.

So a very personal question. A wistful look on the face of this girl. And I hope if there's anyone here who's come along perhaps because their parents have come along. Perhaps because their friends have come along. And also because of the prayer we had earlier. This isn't an [00:07:05] academic thing. This is a most important thing. You can't get anything more important than this. You could listen and understand all about the dispensations. You could be a great dispensationalist and yet not know the Lord Jesus as your savior. You could still go into a Christless eternity. So we would say to you, what about you and God? What about you? Are you really a Christian? And that's another aspect of the dispensation too. It's Christian. Christian means Christ man, Christ woman. If you look at that first assembly outside Jerusalem which the Bible speaks much of at Antioch in Syria. You'll see that they were marked by disciples who were believers. Who gathered together. Who heard and learned [00:08:08] and put into practice the apostles teaching. Remember Barnabas was there. He went and got Paul to come along with him. They taught in the church there. And what happened? That was the first place where disciples were called Christians. It's the Christian dispensation. But they were called Christians by other people. Other people saw Christ in them. They were identified with Christ because of what they believed and how they behaved. And we have to ask ourselves the question, are we like them? It's the Christian dispensation. What makes the church the church? Well we've already mentioned that church means assembly or called out ones. Believers on the Lord Jesus have been called out of this world. Now this is [00:09:02] going to influence what's going to happen I'm sure with what we say in the next two presentations. It's a very important feature. Remember we said earlier on that in other dispensations it can be quite clearly seen that God is working out purposes in this world which affect this earth. But what makes this a special kind of dispensation is that Christians have been called out of this world. They're not being expected to play some part in this world. And I won't say any more for fear of anticipating what we'll say in the next two presentations. And Christians were baptized into one body by the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Remember those believers, those followers of the Lord Jesus who were in the upper room. Upper room. It's all

evocative, isn't it, of what the church is about. They [00:10:04] were in the upper room. A heavenly thought. Something above this world. And on that day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit baptized them into one body. That's what the Bible means by baptism by the Holy Spirit. It's not an individual thing. It's a collective thing that makes us one body. And it happened because the Lord Jesus had gone back to heaven. Remember in John chapter 7 he said he would pour out his Holy Spirit. And that's what happened on the day of Pentecost. Consequent on his ascension and exaltation the Holy Spirit came down. Two fundamental aspects of the current day are contained in this thought. That there's a man in the glory of heaven and there's a divine person here upon earth indwelling the [00:11:03] church. And those who've believed on him since that wonderful day have been included in that baptism, have been added to those believers, have been added to the assembly. It's in Acts chapter 2 verse 47. So the church is not a continuation of Israel. Remembering what we just read from Ephesians chapter 3. This has been mentioned already. A mystery. Something not known before. Even to those great worthies of the Old Testament they didn't know what was going to happen in this current day. They had no idea of how God was going to work. That should immediately make us realize that there is a dispensational aspect of the dealings of God. That the church is not a continuation of Israel. The Lord Jesus himself said in [00:12:03] Matthew chapter 16, I will build my church. Obviously the church didn't exist already at that time. I will build my church. And remarkably the church comprises Jew and Gentile. One aspect of Israel was that it was exclusive to those born Jews. I know there are exceptions. I know about Ruth. You do as well. But characteristically it was a national thing. Limited to those who were born of the stock of Abraham. But the church includes Jew and Gentile. And we read about the Gentiles being those, I'll just read it so I don't get the verse wrong, in which the apostle Paul says in verse 6 of Ephesians chapter 3, that the Gentiles [00:13:02] should be fellow heirs and of the same body and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel. And you've only got to see the importance of this to God for it to come home to our own hearts. We have in Jerusalem the Holy Spirit confirming the work that was done that day. That he had done by the signs, the speaking in tongues that occurred on the day of Pentecost. A very signal in itself that the work that was being done was going to spread beyond the confines of Israel. The confines of the Jewish system. But in Samaria there were those who came to know the Lord Jesus through Philip's preaching. John, Peter came down. They verified what was happening. That same gift was given to confirm it was [00:14:03] a work of God. And then in Cornelius' house, in Acts chapter 10, the very same thing happened when the gospel was preached and they believed. Gentiles, full Gentiles if you like, brought in to the blessing of God. And in a sense the church is more Gentile than Jewish. You only have to read some of the things that the apostle Paul says in Acts to see that as the people of Israel generally rebelled against the preaching that was made firstly by Stephen, that led to him being stoned, and then by the apostle Paul, that really there was a turning to the Gentiles. And so in many ways we see what's prefigured in women in the Old Testament like Asenath and Zipporah. We see that the church is predominantly Gentile. Israel has been set aside until the church has gone to heaven. And that's the teaching [00:15:04] we get in Romans chapter 11. So what are the big differences between Israel's day, that dispensation in the past, and the church's day, the current day? Well we've seen some of them. Law was what came through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Ongoing sacrifices in the Jewish system. Today a finished work, the work of Jesus Christ religion of the Jews was chiefly an earthly one. The very sphere of blessing we had it was earthly. Man looked for prosperity on this earth. We look to heaven as we've been singing in our hymn. Our citizenship is in heaven. Their service was material. It involved animal and vegetable sacrifices. Our service is a spiritual one. The very features of that [00:16:04] system were symbolic. The burnt offering for instance was symbolic of something that was going to answer to it perfectly in the death of the Lord Jesus. We've got the reality of that today. We see in the burnt offering the wonderful offering of the Lord

Jesus upon the cross of Calvary when he devoted himself to his father's will even unto death. And of course we could say that of the other offerings as well. As we've already mentioned the Jewish system was a national one. Our one is for all as it says in Romans chapter 10 verse 12. In Judaism the status of people was of servants and children. We get this in Galatians. But it's brought out that we are sons. God dwelt among the people of Israel. A wonderful thing was mentioned in the meeting this morning at Plumstead. God dwelt among his people Israel [00:17:01] in the camp, in the tabernacle. That was a wonderful privilege for the people of Israel. But God indwells the church as we get in 1 Corinthians chapter 3 verse 16 a completely different thing. Israel was time bound from the foundation of the world and not continuing into eternity. But the church was the thought of God from eternity, the mystery that we just thought about in Ephesians chapter 3 and goes on into eternity because the Lord Jesus said the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. It goes on into eternity as we see in Revelation. The church is so special to God. Some of these things that we've got here could be said about Israel. Yes she had a house, she had a temple. But the church is the house of God, is the temple of God, a spiritual house. Yes Israel is presented [00:18:02] often like a bride, like a wife. But the church is the bride, is the wife of the Lamb. And yes sometimes Israel is likened to sheep, God's sheep, the sheep he cares for. He was so concerned about when those who should have been shepherds didn't look after them. But the church is called the flock of God. And in contrast to Israel is presented in that rather lovely way as the flock when Israel is simply referred to as the foe. There shall be one flock and one shepherd. But the most basic presentation of the church that we have in scripture is as the body. And you won't find a reference to Israel as being the body. An organism, not an organisation. The Lord Jesus is the head of the body. United to him all saints, all believers on the Lord Jesus are united to him. He is the head. The body [00:19:08] is one, it has many members. Each believer is a member. There should be unity and variety not uniformity or independence. We have differences as to gift and responsibility but each one of us is a member of Christ's body. That intimacy, that closeness of relationship to him is something that was never true in Israel in that previous dispensation. We should be joints of supply seeking to build one another up in our most holy faith. Do we realise how vital we are to one another? Not because of who we are but because we are connected to the Lord Jesus and he wants to use us for his glory, for the blessing of each and every saint that we come into contact with and as a witness to those who are outside this wonderful grace [00:20:02] of God. But we've heard before that dispensations have gone wrong. God has put responsibility in people's hands and they failed. They failed the particular responsibility that God has given to them. Israel is the classic example. There to be a witness for God in this world and yet turn into the idolatry of the nations around them and rebelling and acting and behaving in a way that was even worse than the nations around them. And in some ways this is where it's all too sadly true that the current day is a dispensation because we failed in regard to our responsibilities for God. As in every other dispensation God's people haven't been faithful to him and his word. But God is faithful to his people and that's what we've seen, [00:21:01] haven't we? In God's dealings with men, although they haven't been faithful, he has been faithful. And so the story of the church's failure also tells us that he will help those who want to put the truth of the church into practice. And that really is one of the key exercises I think behind this day, this conference. That as we understand the dispensations we realize just what our privileges are today, just what our responsibilities are today, and we seek to put them into practice. Not because we think we're better than other Christians, far be the thought, but we realize just how much this is close to the heart of God. And if we do realize that and we seek his help and we keep humble and lowly, he will help us to be overcomers. And that's the message, isn't it, of Revelation chapter 2 and chapter 3. Now I'm going to show you a slide which I think gave Mike a little bit of a shock [00:22:05] when he saw it. He wondered what I was going to say. But I do just want to say that there have been others who've been faithful in previous centuries of the church's existence, and to whom we owe a great deal for their faithfulness. Because on the left is a

church as it was in England up until the time of the Reformation. You would have gone in that door underneath the spire because I think we would have all been those who would have gone through that door. And we would have stood there in that place and we would have had no part to play in the church service. The whole church service would have been conducted behind that screen that you see there. All the singing would have gone on there. You could have smelled the incense, you could have heard the singing, but you probably wouldn't have seen much and [00:23:03] you wouldn't have participated in it. How different is that from what God intends for his people? We enjoyed this morning, didn't we, where we gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus. The freedom to be together around him and to sing praises to him, to worship him in our heart. For those who were directed by the Holy Spirit to give sound in prayer to the thoughts that we had in our hearts, to read out God's word. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst. How different is that from what the Lord Jesus intends for his people when they come together? You know, it's one of the great gifts of the Reformation. The fact that the brother who was led by the Lord to act in faith, Martin Luther, he emphasised the importance of congregational singing and [00:24:03] he wrote hymns. Many of the Reformation leaders wrote hymns because they believed that all the people of God should be involved in the worship of God. The one on the right is the kind of compromise church that occurred after the Reformation, which we won't go into in too much detail, but I just put that slide up to you to indicate really in the church there has been a return to the old Jewish way of worship, being at a distance, not participating, being outside. One of the themes of the meeting this morning at Plumstead was that we've been brought nigh by the precious blood of Christ and we should value what it is to be gathered about the Lord Jesus. When we remember him in his death and we can give worship to the Father, we are near and we can't be nearer than we are because of what the Lord Jesus has accomplished for us. But we see always that the devil is trying to undermine what [00:25:06] God wants to accomplish in his dealings with us. This is the picture of the history of the church in Revelation 2 and 3. We haven't got enough time to go into it, but it just shows you that right at the beginning there was a loss of first love. They left, or rather they left their first love is the more scriptural way to put it. And what has it ended up in the end? A complete lukewarmness in regard to God. We have to challenge our hearts. How much are we really devoted to the Lord Jesus in our lives and in our companies of his people? So what's next? Well, you know, sometimes things strike you and you say, somebody referred to this yesterday, people deny the rapture, the heavenly hope. But you know, there's a remarkable thing, isn't it? That in this panorama of the church's history [00:26:04] in Revelation 2 and 3, what's immediately said in the beginning of chapter 4, come up hither. Don't you feel when you read words like that, the Holy Spirit is saying to us, that's the truth of the rapture. When the church's time on earth has gone, she has come to an end according to the purposes of God. The Lord Jesus will call her up to be with him in heaven. That wonderful hope that we have. The Lord Jesus gave himself to receive and present the church to himself. We're going to be called up to heaven and we're going to enjoy the marriage and the marriage supper of the Lamb. The tribulation, what happens on earth, is of a completely different character from the ways of God in grace with his heavenly people. And it's when he comes to judge, we'll come with him. We had that emphasized to us [00:27:02] yesterday. So the church's wonderful future is a blessed hope, is a heavenly hope. It's above. We're a heavenly people. Our citizenship is in heaven. It's not down here. The glorious appearing is a different thing from the blessed hope. That's the church being called up to be with Christ. The appearing is when he deals with this earth. One is a secret thing we could say as far as this world is concerned. Another is a very public thing. And after that, after the marriage and the marriage supper of the Lamb, as wife, the church will reign with him over the kingdom. We'll be the consort of the Lord Jesus for a thousand years. It's a different way to the way things happen at the moment in our marriages, isn't it? We're a bride for a day if we're a woman, and we are then the wife for the rest of our lives together. But the wife, the church's wife, she's going to

be wife for a thousand [00:28:01] years. Maybe this is making it a little bit too cut and dried, but I'm trying to convey the thought that we'll enjoy being the bride for eternity. We have bridal characteristics already, of course, but you know what I'm saying. So let's give the Lord Jesus the preeminence and seek to keep the unity of the Spirit among us today. Do you want to become a member of the church? I'm sure what we've heard would encourage anyone who hasn't trusted the Lord Jesus to say, I want to be a member of that church. I'm not talking about the Brethren or the Baptist, the Church of England. I'm talking about the church as it's presented in scripture. Do you want to be a member of that church? You need to believe on the Lord Jesus as your saviour. It's not enough to be baptised or to take communion, certainly not to join a denomination. If you want to be a member, you just simply have to trust the Lord Jesus as your saviour. Of course, that's perhaps not the chief motivation why we've become Christians, but I hope that something of what you said would really encourage our [00:29:05] hearts to put into practice what it is to be a Christian today in this current day and age, and anyone who hasn't trusted the Lord Jesus, trust him now before it's too late. Don't be left behind, because when the church goes, you'll have no opportunity to be saved there. Let's encourage ourselves with these thoughts anyway.