

# Rightly Dividing the Word

The Bible does not have to be a complicated Book, and certainly not for those of us who are saved and desire a closer relationship to God through His words. However, there are rules, or guidelines, that must be followed, if we are to be disciplined and wise students of Scripture.

II Timothy 2:15 tells us, “**Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.**” There are proper divisions to be made when reading and studying the Bible. When these divisions are ignored, a serious and well-intended Bible study can result in heresy. One must learn to *rightly divide*.

The Bible presents different resurrections, different judgments, different baptisms, different places to spend eternity, different gospels, different spirits, different spiritual fathers, and different kinds of people (just to mention a few examples), yet many people fail to make the necessary distinctions and divisions, and this is why so many denominations and even cults exist.

## Some Questions to Ask

When reading or studying your Bible, there are some good and wise questions to always ask. These questions will help to keep you within the boundaries of good and healthy Bible study.

### I. WHO IS SPEAKING?

Speech comes from three sources in the Bible. God often speaks and He is *always right*. Man also speaks, and is *sometimes misleading*. Satan sometimes speaks and is *often misleading*. Read the first five verses of Genesis chapter three to see this truth illustrated on all three counts.

The point here is that just because the Bible says something, this doesn't mean GOD said it. It was Satan who said, “Ye shall not surely die.” God wanted this information recorded for you to know about, but it wasn't God Himself who said it.

## **II. TO WHOM IS THIS SCRIPTURE DIRECTED?**

There are three classes of people in the Bible (I Corinthians 10:32), so scripture may be directed to either or all of these classes. Scripture may be directed toward Jews, Gentiles, the Church, or even all three. It is wrong to apply something to yourself which God directed to someone else. For example, a Christian could easily start a “no hair” cult with Jeremiah 48:37 if he just ignored the fact that this verse deals with God’s judgment on a *Gentile nation*.

## **III. DOES THIS CONCERN INDIVIDUALS OR NATIONS?**

God says things to nations in the Bible that He never says to individuals, and vice versa. For example, God promises to save any *individual* who calls upon his name for salvation in Romans 10:9-13, but this is not a promise to save any nation. If the U.S President and Congress passed a resolution to have an official day of salvation prayer for our nation on the basis of Romans 10:9-13 it wouldn’t mean anything. Many things in our nation will have to change before God can shower His blessings upon us as in years past. However, any individual American can call upon the Lord for personal salvation in spite of the sad condition of the country at large.

By contrast, Romans 11:17-25 deals with the salvation of the *nation* of Israel in the coming Tribulation. This will happen in spite of the fact that many *individual* Jews are lost and will not be saved. One must rightly divide between nations and individuals.

## **IV. WHAT IS THE CONTEXT?**

Sometimes it will be necessary to rightly divide God’s word from your own opinion or tradition. Many false teachings have been derived from the Bible by people who pull texts from their context. I grew up thinking it was a sin to *sell a dog* because of a family member who used Deuteronomy 23:18 out of its proper context. Many people think they are saved today because their blind leaders have stolen Acts 2:38 from its context and have failed to properly expound this verse to their followers.

Remember, always ask, “*What is the context?*” Read verses, not just phrases, and read chapters, not just verses.

## **V. DOES THIS CONCERN SPIRITUAL OR PHYSICAL MATTERS?**

The Bible speaks of spiritual matters and of physical matters. Much confusion can erupt when one fails to distinguish between the two.

Many people, for example, like to read God’s many Old Testament promises to the nation of Israel and then spiritualize them for the church. The idea here is that God did not physically mean what He said to Israel about a future kingdom and the promised land, so He must have been making spiritual references to the church. The promised “land” would actually be a “place of blessing” for the Christian. This leaves the *physical* nation of Israel out in the cold, robbed of her precious promises. There is no reason to assume that God didn’t mean exactly what He said about Israel and her glorious days ahead. Many err in spiritualizing God’s physical promises. The same is done with the doctrines of the Second Coming, the First Resurrection, the Millennium, etc.

Then again, some things in the Bible are spiritual. The chariots and horses of fire in II Kings 2:11 are obviously not physical horses and chariots because the fire would consume them. These are spiritual (supernatural) horses and chariots, just like the ones in II Kings 6:17.

Always ask, “*Does this concern spiritual or physical matters?*”

## **VI. IS THIS SCRIPTURE LITERAL OR FIGURATIVE?**

Please do not confuse this question with the previous one. When something is *literal* it is *real*. When something is *figurative*, it only *represents* something that is real and isn’t real itself.

For example, Genesis tells us that God made man from the dust of the earth. That’s literal. The dirt doesn’t represent anything, and the man doesn’t represent anything. God took literal dirt and made a literal man.

So what is figurative? In John 10:9 Jesus said, “*I am the door.*” Obviously, Jesus isn’t a literal door with hinges, so He was speaking figuratively. The same is true of His claims of being a shepherd, the lily of the valleys, the rose of Sharon, the bright and morning star, and the lion of the tribe of Judah. These are figurative terms used to describe His person, not literal terms.

## **VII. DOES THIS DEAL WITH ETERNAL OR TEMPORAL MATTERS?**

Don’t make the assumption that a word or group of words are always used the same way in the Bible. Sometimes the Bible speaks of eternal things while at other times it speaks of temporal things.

For example, the word “damnation” is used in both ways. John 5:29 speaks of eternal damnation for the unsaved, yet I Corinthians 11:29-32 speaks of temporal damnation for those who are saved so that they will *not* be condemned with the world. These are two different kinds of damnation for two different kinds of people. Always bear in mind that some things in the Bible are eternal while others are temporal.

## **VIII. IS THIS CONDITIONAL OR UNCONDITIONAL?**

Some statements in the Bible have conditions attached to them, while others do not. II Timothy 2:11-12 place a condition upon our reigning with Christ in his kingdom: we must “suffer” for him today. That’s the condition. No suffering means no reigning. No cross means no crown. That’s a conditional promise which disqualifies many people.

The next chapter, however, presents an unconditional promise about the apostasy of the last days (II Tim. 3:1-7). There is no condition placed upon this promise. God didn’t say, “*If my people don’t do such and such, then perilous times shall come.*” He plainly declared that perilous times “shall” come. It’s a definite and unconditional promise.

## **IX. DOES THIS AGREE WITH PAUL’S WRITINGS?**

As we’ve already seen, the Bible is written to different classes of people. Well, to be more specific at this point, Paul himself had a special calling of God which other New Testament writers did not have. Paul was called of God to minister to the Gentiles (non Jews). This is evident from reading Acts 28:25-31, Romans 15:8, 15:16, and Galatians 2:7-8. We should never use another portion of scripture to overrule what God has given us through Paul. Some reason that “it’s better to obey Jesus than Paul,” but the fact is that Jesus handpicked Paul to minister to you.

A good example of this is the issue of whether or not the church has to endure the Great Tribulation Period which is coming upon the earth. Paul’s writings state clearly that Christians are:

1. Not waiting for the Tribulation - I Thes 1:10
2. Delivered from the wrath to come - I Ths 5:9
3. Going to be caught up - I Ths 4
4. Not condemned with the world - I Cor 11

It would be foolish to ignore Paul’s instruction by going to some other place in the Bible, like Matthew or Hebrews, and using passages out of context to teach that Christians must go through the Tribulation. Paul’s writings to the church do not teach this, so the other passages cannot mean what many are using them to teach. There will be people in the Tribulation, but not Christians who are presently in the body of Christ.

## **X. DOES THIS CONCERN MY STANDING OR MY STATE?**

A Christian’s *standing* has to do with his *position* in Christ, but his *state* has to do with his practice or his circumstance. Ephesians 2:1-6 says that we are seated in heavenly places in Christ. That’s our standing. I am a son of God, sealed and kept by the power of God until Jesus returns.

My state is different and subject to change (Philip. 4:11; Col. 4:7) because I am still in this world in the flesh. My flesh isn’t born again, so it does not have a perfect standing and it is not “seated in heavenly places.” When Jesus returns, Christians will receive incorruptible bodies (I Cor. 15:51-52), and these new

bodies will enjoy the same standing as our spirits, but until then we have to discern between standing and state. Our standing concerns our *relationship to God*, but our state concerns our *fellowship with God*.

## XI. DOES THIS CONCERN CHRIST'S FIRST OR SECOND COMING?

I Peter 1:11 divides the First and Second Coming by using two words: suffering and glory. The First Coming is largely associated with the sufferings of Christ, while the Second Coming emphasizes his glory. Notice a few simple comparisons:

<b>First Coming:</b>	<b>Second Coming:</b>
Suffering	Glory
Lamb	Lion
Prophet	King
Rides Donkey	Rides White Horse
Killed by enemies	Kills Enemies
Rejected by Israel	Received by Israel

A good example of the kind of mistakes which one can make with this issue is found in Isaiah 2:4: “. . . **and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.**” This passage is used by many (including the United Nations) to promote world peace, but it will not be fulfilled until the Second Coming of Christ, which is evident to anyone who takes the time to read the entire verse and the preceding verses.

## XII. WHAT SAITH THE SCRIPTURE?

Paul asked this question in Romans 4:3. *What does the rest of the Bible say about this subject?* It is seldom that God addresses an issue in only one place, so learn to look carefully through the Bible to see *all* that God says, not just one or two places.

A concordance will prove very helpful in this. Find the key words or phrases in a passage and then search out those words

and phrases in the rest of the Bible. For example, if you read about the “image of God” in Genesis, you would be very limited in your understanding of the phrase until you studied the phrase in the New Testament. Then you would complete your understanding by learning that the image of God is Jesus Christ. Don’t privately interpret the scripture. Allow the scripture to interpret itself.

## Always ask:

- Who is speaking?
- Who is being addressed?
- Individuals or nations?
- What is the context?
- Spiritual or physical?
- Literal or figurative?
- Eternal or temporal?
- Conditional or unconditional?
- Agree with Paul's writings?
- Standing or state?
- First or second coming?
- What does other Scripture say?

In addition to making right divisions in regards to subject matter and people in the Bible, right divisions must also be made in regards to *time*. That is, there are distinct periods of time in the Bible that God dispenses to man, time periods that differ one from another through the course of several thousand years. The next section will deal with these time periods and the importance of understanding their right divisions.

# The Seven Dispensations

A dispensation in the Bible is a period of time in which God *dispenses* to man certain responsibilities and then holds him accountable. Since these laws differ throughout the Bible, it becomes necessary to respect certain divisions. For example, God didn't command Christians today to offer a lamb for sacrifice, so this places us in a different dispensation than the Old Testament Jews who did offer sacrifice. Likewise, God didn't command the Jews under the law of Moses to not eat of the Tree of Life, as He did Adam and Eve, so Adam and Eve were in yet another dispensation. So the study of dispensations is simply a study to better understand how God has dealt with man differently through the ages.

The word itself is found four times in the Bible: I Corinthians 9:17, Ephesians 1:10, Ephesians 3:2, and Colossians 1:25. Each time the word has to do with either a period of time or a responsibility which has been given to someone.

One good reason for dispensations is to reveal or emphasize an attribute of God. For example, under the law His *holiness* was emphasized. Today, during the church age, we see that His *grace* is the highlighted attribute. This doesn't mean that God is no longer holy. He is just as holy as ever, but He has chosen to emphasize His *grace* for this present age. For instance, a preacher doesn't preach a message to fathers on Father's Day because he doesn't appreciate mothers. He does so because the day places an emphasis on fathers. The mothers had their day a month earlier.

Another reason for dispensations is for God to give man every possible opportunity to be reconciled to Himself. At the final White Throne Judgment (Rev. 20:11-15), man will have no excuse because God will have tried him under seven distinct dispensations and man failed under each one. For example, no one will be able to say, "*Well, if I hadn't been born a sinner I could have stayed clean and holy.*" There was a time when two clean and holy people lived in a perfect paradise, yet they chose to sin against God. For example, no one can say, "*Well, if I could have just seen Jesus for myself I would have believed.*" In the Millennium people will see Him on the throne in Jerusalem, yet there is a massive rebellion by Gog and Magog at the close of the



1000-year reign (Rev. 20:8-10). The seven dispensations prove that (1) God is holy and just and (2) that man is utterly hopeless.

A third reason for dispensations is to reveal the approved and the heretics. II Timothy 2:15 says, **“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”** A heretic does not rightly divide God’s word, so he is not “approved.” Notice the words of I Corinthians 11:19: **“For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you.”** Those who refuse to rightly divide the truth will eventually teach heresy. This casts a “blacklight” upon them while the approved teachers of truth shine even brighter in the light of God’s word. So, each dispensation allows for a very definite contrast to be made between the approved and the heretics.

The following chart shows the seven main dispensations with their beginning and their end:

<b>DISPENSATION</b>	<b>BEGINNING</b>	<b>END</b>
INNOCENCE	MAN’S CREATION	MAN’S FIRST SIN
CONSCIENCE	MAN’S FIRST SIN	FLOOD
HUMAN GOVERNMENT	AFTER FLOOD	TOWER OF BABEL
PROMISE (FAMILY)	CALL OF ABRAHAM	EGYPTIAN BONDAGE
LAW	MOSES AT MT. SINAI	CALVARY
GRACE	CALVARY	SECOND COMING
KINGDOM	SECOND COMING	WHITE THRONE JUDGMENT

A more detailed dispensational chart is provided at the centerfold of this booklet.

We will now study through each dispensation individually, considering five different factors for each dispensation: its beginning, man’s responsibility, God’s attribute, man’s test and failure, and, finally, the closing judgment.

## I. THE DISPENSATION OF INNOCENCE

### Beginning

This dispensation began in Genesis 1:26 when man was created in God's image and placed under God's authority in a perfect setting.

### Man's Responsibility

Man was given "dominion" over God's creation as God's very own "son" (Luke 3:38). He was given perfect weather, perfect health, a perfect paradise to live in, and even a perfect wife! His primary responsibility is given in Genesis 2:8-15: "**And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. . . . And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.**" Adam's duty was to simply "dress" and "keep" the garden of God. There was no curse yet placed upon the earth, so thorns and thistles were not a factor. Adam's job was apparently an easy one and also a pleasant one.

He was also permitted to eat from the trees of this garden, as we see from Genesis 2:16-17: "**And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.**"

### God's Attribute

The attribute of God which is most manifest in this dispensation is God's goodness. This is quite evident from what we read just before God creates man and places him in the garden. We are reminded several times in chapter one that what God created was "good" (see 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). God is a

good God, and He provided man with a good environment and a good opportunity to live and prosper for God's glory.

### **Man's Test and Failure**

God Himself didn't tempt man with sin, but He did *test* man by allowing the devil to tempt him. Man was forbidden to eat of the "tree of knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:17), yet he had liberty to sin and do so if he chose. It was God's will that man love Him enough to be obedient and remain holy, yet man failed his first test. We read in Genesis 3:1-6, **"Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat."**

Notice the elements of the first temptation:

- (1) Satan questions God's word (verse 2)
- (2) The woman changes God's word by omitting the word "freely." (verse 2. See God's statement in 2:16).
- (3) Satan's outright lie (verse 4)
- (4) Satan's suggestion that God was withholding certain knowledge from Eve (verse 5)
- (5) The woman's reasoning that the tree was good for food" (verse 6). That is, "after all, I do have to eat! I must have food to live, and here is good food!"  
She justified her sin.
- (6) The woman's reasoning that the tree *looked* good (verse 6). The tree was good for food and it even looked good, so she figured it just couldn't hurt her.

- (7) The woman's reasoning that the tree could make her wise (verse 6). Eve was a secondary creation (made from Adam's rib, not from the ground itself) so she was a weaker vessel. She wasn't equal to Adam, but was rather a help meet for him. The devil's temptation appealed to this "weakness" in Eve and caused her to want to "better" herself. Instead of ERA, this was EVE, the original "liberated woman." She liberated the human race from the kingdom of God to a fallen state called sin, all because she ignored God's simple order. Adam then ate of the tree himself, although he was not deceived as was Eve (I Tim. 2:14).

### The Closing Judgment

The dispensation of innocence ends with a curse placed upon the serpent, the woman, the ground, the man, and even an innocent lamb (Gen. 3:15-19).

First the serpent is cursed. We can't be certain of what the serpent looked like at first, but he was forced to crawl upon his belly from this day forth, in full contact with the cursed ground. He is also told that a promised seed (Christ) will defeat him one day.

Then the woman is cursed by having to suffer in childbearing.

The ground is then cursed and the man is told that he will have to till the cursed ground rather than work in a perfect paradise as he had been doing in the garden. Thorns, thistles and sweat would be his lot in life.

Almost unnoticed is the innocent lamb which has to be slain to provide a skin for their covering (3:21). Adam and Eve tried covering themselves with fig leaves (verse 7), but God required that BLOOD be shed to cover sin (Heb. 9:22; Lev. 17:11). So, an innocent lamb had to shed its blood and die that they might have a covering. We know this from a couple places in Scripture: ". . . **the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world**" (Rev. 13:8) and "**The lambs are for thy clothing, and the goats are the price of the field.**" (Prov. 27:26)

So, the first dispensation closed with man being expelled from Eden to enter a life of hard work and suffering. Yet he left Eden with the promise of a coming seed (Christ) Who would redeem fallen man from the bondage of the devil (3:15).

## **II. THE DISPENSATION OF CONSCIENCE**

### **Beginning**

The dispensation of conscience begins when man is expelled from the garden of Eden in Genesis 3:23. He was now a fallen creature, and he was conscious of it (Gen. 3:7, 10-11). He now had an awareness of good and evil. He also knew that God expected a blood sacrifice from man since the lamb skin was required in Eden instead of the fig leaves.

### **Man's Responsibility**

Man's responsibility at this point was to be faithful to the three witnesses which he now had:

- (1) An internal witness (Rom. 2:14-15; Jer. 17:1).  
His conscience was his internal witness concerning good and evil.
- (2) An external witness (Rom. 1:19-20). God's creation itself stood as an outward witness that God is the sovereign Creator, and all are accountable to Him.
- (3) History (Gen. 3). Man knew from the events in Genesis chapter three that God was holy and would not overlook sin. He also finds confirmation in Genesis chapter four (Cain and Abel) that God rejects anything short of a blood atonement for sin.

In this dispensation, man has no written authority, no Bible, so he is judged in regards to his faithfulness to these three witnesses.

### **God's Attribute**

The attribute which God seems to display the most during this time is His *longsuffering*. This dispensation is 1,700 years in length, and man's life span was eight and nine hundred years (Gen. 5). This allowed man ample time to become very good or very evil. He chose to become very evil, yet God's grace abounded even more and His spirit "strove" with man on through

the days of Noah (Gen. 6:3). We read in I Peter 3:20 that “. . . **the LONGSUFFERING of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water.**” (emphasis added) God was longsuffering with man in spite of the prevailing wickedness upon the earth.

### **Man’s Test and Failure**

A redemptive seed had been promised in Genesis 3:15, so man’s great test was to keep his generations clean and undefiled. We know this from God’s comments about Noah, the one man who found grace in God’s eyes: **“But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD. These are the generations of Noah: Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God.”** (Gen. 6:8-9) Noah had kept himself and his family unspotted from the wicked world. The gross sexual perversion of that day had not affected him, yet it did affect the rest of the world. Many had even given themselves over to sexual relations with fallen angels (Gen. 6:2-4; Jude 6-7; II Pet. 2:4). Even the animals were perverse, for they too ended up drowning in the flood. “All flesh” had corrupted his way upon the earth (Gen. 6:12). If God had not intervened when He did, the entire plan would have eventually been corrupted and His redemption plan would have been destroyed. Man failed his test miserably.

### **The Closing Judgment**

The judgment which ended this dispensation was the universal flood (Gen. 7:15-24). All flesh died except for eight souls (I Pet. 3:20).

## **III. THE DISPENSATION OF HUMAN GOVERNMENT**

### **Beginning**

This dispensation begins in Genesis 8:20 with Noah and his family coming out of the Ark and making a new beginning. He offers sacrifice in 8:20, and God accepts it, so the new dispensation is under way.

Notice how conscience is still a factor. With no written revelation, Noah still knows to offer sacrifice.

Noah and his family are the first people to be “blessed” since the fall of man in Genesis 3.

Up to this point, God has not shown man how to govern *nations*, for He has only dealt with man on an individual basis. Now, after men have populated and corrupted the earth so much that God had to destroy them all, He chooses to reveal to man certain national duties.

### **Man’s Responsibility**

In this dispensation God demands that men properly govern society. They are to still follow their conscience, since there is no written revelation, but they do have the lessons of their ancestors.

Man can eat animals now (9:3), whereas before he only ate vegetation. This factor coupled with the fact that man’s sins caused the animal population to be drowned puts a fear of man in the animals (9:2).

Notice that the blood of animals is not to be eaten (9:4). This also hold true throughout future dispensations (Lev. 17:11; Acts 15:29).

The highest responsibility of any government is that of protecting and taking human life. Innocent people are to be protected, and those worthy of death are to be executed. Therefore, we find God commanding man to carry out the death penalty (Gen. 9:5-6). This wasn’t the case in the previous dispensation when Cain murdered Able (Gen. 4), but with human governments forming God saw the need to install the death penalty. He will hold nations accountable for not obeying this law (I Kgs. 20:42).

### **God’s Attribute**

God’s most prominent attribute during this dispensation is justice. God is a just God, and He expects society to be governed His way. Righteous people are to be appreciated and blessed, while wicked people are to be punished. This is explained quite well in Ecclesiastes 8:11: **“Because sentence against an evil**

**work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.”**

### **Man’s Test and Failure**

The dispensation of human government offered man a perfect opportunity to make a fresh new start and fulfill God’s will by governing himself responsibly, but he failed.

Three distinct races with three distinct characteristics (Gen. 9:24-27) had no business integrating and pretending that they were all equal, but they did. This led to the breakdown in society which promoted unity and humanism while downgrading God.

Notice how no one prayed about building the tower of Babel (Gen. 11). They all got together with one speech in one place (Shinar-Babylon), and they used man-made materials to build a tower in honor of man and progress. God isn’t mentioned in Genesis 11:1-4, but man says plenty about himself (“one another . . . us . . . us . . . we . . . etc. - 11:3-4).

### **The Closing Judgment**

God, in His wisdom, ends this dispensation simply by confounding man’s language so he can’t communicate (Gen. 11:5-9). So this turns out to be a curse, causing national differences in regards to speech, geography, environment and culture (see Acts 17:24-27). After this event, God is practically finished with *nations* (plural), and He picks out ONE nation to be His own, but even then it must begin with one *family*.

## **IV. THE DISPENSATION OF PROMISE (Family or Patriarchal)**

### **Beginning**

Our next dispensation begins in Genesis chapter 12 with God calling Abraham (Abram) to begin a chosen people for Himself, the Jews: **“Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy**



**father's house, unto a land that I will shew 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 families of the earth be blessed.” (Gen. 12:1-3)** In this text and in later texts, God makes several promises to Abraham:

- (1) He promises to make him a great nation (12:1-3). Israel became a great nation.
- (2) God promised to make his name great (12:2). He did, for Abraham is a highly regarded name among Jews, Christians, and even Moslems.
- (3) God promised that Abraham would be a blessing and that nations would be blessed in him (12:2-3). Reading the next few chapters in Genesis clearly reveals that Abraham was a blessing as an individual (especially to Lot), and the record of history reveals that nations have been blessed in him as well—through Israel and through Jesus Christ (see Gal. 3:8-14).
- (4) God promise him a physical seed in Isaac (Gen. 12:7), and a spiritual seed in Christ (Gen. 22:17-18).
- (5) God promised Abraham a land grant (Gen. 15:18-21).
- (6) God promised that kings would come from Abraham and many nations (Gen. 17:4-6).
- (7) God promised that Abraham’s circumcision and that of his descendants would serve as a token of the Abramic covenant (Gen. 17:9-14). Those not circumcised were excluded from the covenant.

### **Man’s Responsibility**

By “man” we mean “men under the covenant, Abraham’s descendants.” The Gentiles are still judged as in previous dispensations, primarily according to their conscience (Romans chapter 1), but now we have a peculiar people whom God has chosen for His own. They have special duties like no one else:

- (1) They must continue to offer sacrifice (Gen. 12:7-8; 13:4; 13:18; 22:13, etc.)
- (2) They must remain in the land of promise. When they leave the land the blessings cease (example - Gen. 12:6-20).
- (3) They must be circumcised (Gen. 17:9-14).

## **God's Attribute**

The attribute of God which is most manifest in this dispensation is His faithfulness. God is faithful in keeping His promises to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve tribes of Israel.

## **Man's Test and Failure**

The real test was whether or not man would remain in the promised land and trust God by continually offering sacrifice and obeying God's law of circumcision. Man does not pass the test for he ends up going down to Egypt. He also ceases to offer sacrifice and practice circumcision (Exo. 3:18; 4:26).

## **The Closing Judgment**

The dispensation of promise ends up with the entire nation of Israel under Egyptian bondage for 400 years. In God's wisdom, this would be a time of building up a strong nation of over 2,000,000 people who would bring honor and glory to the true God, unlike all the other nations.

# **V. THE DISPENSATION OF LAW**

## **Beginning**

The law dispensation begins in Exodus chapter twenty when God gave the written law to Moses at Mt. Sinai.

The law consisted of three basic divisions: commandments, judgments, and ordinances. The commandments (Exo. 20:1-26) are moral, the judgments (Exo. 21:1-24:11) are civil, and the ordinances (Exo. 24:12-31:18 & Lev. 1-8) are religious.

The law was not to save man, but rather to show man his lost condition and his need for Christ (Rom. 3:19-21; Gal. 3:24-25). In fact it is called a curse (Gal. 3:13). Yet, the Jews were so zealous about their new law(s) that they committed themselves to keep it before the religious (redemptive) section of the law was given. That is, they made the bold commitment of Exodus 19:8

and 24:3-8 before God had given them the redemption section of Exodus 24:12-31:18. Only a few weeks later, in Exodus chapter 32, they are worshipping a golden calf! By Exodus 40 they have the tabernacle, the offerings by Leviticus 6, and the priests by Leviticus 8, so they now have a redemption plan which allows them to be reconciled to God if they violate the law.

### **Man's Responsibility**

Under the law man was to keep God's commandments in a right spirit without becoming conceited and self-righteous. He was expected to keep all of God's law without adding to or diminishing from it (Deu. 4:2). Outside influences such as the Babylonian Talmud and various traditions were strictly forbidden. God wanted man to clearly see the wide gap that existed between Himself and man.

### **God's Attribute**

God's most manifest attribute under the law is His holiness, which is obvious with the word "holy" occurring over sixty times in Exodus alone, the first mention being Exodus 3:5 when God calls Moses to launch the new dispensation.

### **Man's Test and Failure**

Would man live by God's word alone? Would he live by "every word" (Deu. 8:3) or would he give place to the deceitfulness of sin and fail in yet another dispensation?

As we know, Israel rejected the written law and went after false gods and was eventually carried away into foreign captivity. Later they rejected the incarnate law, Jesus Christ. So, those who had been entrusted to keep and honor the law actually killed the Lawgiver!

## **The Closing Judgment**

The closing judgment is twofold:

- (1) Christ is judged on Calvary as a payment for sin. His statement “It is finished” (John 19:30) brings the law dispensation to an end.
- (2) Israel is judged for the next 2,000 years for murdering her Messiah. The temple is destroyed, along with Jerusalem, and Israel is dispersed among the nations. This is Israel’s present condition, although God will soon resume His dealings with his chosen people in the coming tribulation period (Rev. 6-19).

## **VI. THE DISPENSATION OF GRACE**

Unlike with previous dispensations, there is a definite period of transition between law and grace. The law and the prophets were until John the Baptist (Luke 16:16), yet it isn’t correct to say that the dispensation of grace began immediately after John’s death. John dies in Matthew 14:10, yet five chapters later Jesus is still speaking of keeping the law in order to have eternal life (Matthew 19:17-18), although He is clearly speaking of the *moral* law, not all the law. Others are saved by faith with no mention of the commandments (Luke 7:48-50). Conversions differ as one reads through the ministry of Christ and through the book of Acts, so it’s not possible to select a definite starting place where the law stops and grace begins. God uses this transition period to slowly usher in the day of grace. Remember, the promised kingdom is being offered to Israel clear through Acts chapter 7, so we are in Acts chapter 8 before we see a clear-cut faith conversion to Christ based on His redemptive work at Calvary.

The reason for the gospel of John emphasizing grace more than the other three gospels is that John was written around 85 A.D., which was *after Paul’s revelation*. The others were written earlier.

## Beginning

It is my personal belief that the dispensation of grace began at Calvary, *but no one knew it* (John 1:17). God used about the first fifteen chapters of Acts to reveal this to man. Hebrews 9:15-17 tells us that the new covenant was in effect after Jesus died, but who knew it? Peter didn't know it in Acts 2, because it is in Acts 10 that God gives him this special revelation (Acts 10:9-28). This is why so many cults like the book of Acts: it's a *transitional book of progressive revelation*. If one establishes his doctrine in Acts 2, then he errs greatly, because God reveals more to man in later chapters. The dispensation of grace began at Calvary, but it takes until about Acts 15 to get everyone to understand this (Acts 15:11). This dispensation is especially given to Paul (Eph. 3:2).

## Man's Responsibility

In Ephesians 2:8-10, Paul sums up man's responsibility in the age of grace: **“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”**

Today, men are expected to receive Christ by faith and walk in good works to glorify Christ. We are to be **SAVED** and **SERVING**. Our service includes glorifying the Saviour, evangelizing the sinners, and edifying the saints.

## God's Attribute

God's main attribute in this dispensation is grace. The word “grace” is found 170 times in the Bible, about half of which are found in Paul's writings alone. God is gracious to those who exercise faith in Jesus Christ, because Christ is “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). God's grace in this age accomplishes three great things:

- (1) Saves sinners (Eph. 2:8-9)
- (2) Places Jews and Gentiles into one body (Eph. 2:11-14)
- (3) Establishes glory for God in ages to come (Eph. 2:7)

## **Man's Test and Failure**

Rather than stick to the primary duties of the church, God's people have given way to gross apostasy, and the church age will end in apostasy like all other dispensations. Paul said in II Timothy 3:1-7: **“This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away. For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts, Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.”** He tells the Thessaloians that there will be a “falling away” in the last days. The church has left the three simple duties which we've just mentioned, and she has gone lusting after worldliness and selfish gain. Everything has been modernized, and the old-time gospel is seldom heard. Preachers have quit preaching against sin and have resorted to “counseling” and tickling ears. False Bible translations have been invited into our churches, and genuine revival is a thing of the past. Performance has replaced praise, and worldliness has replaced godliness. God's people have grown to fear men, and they've forgotten to fear God.

## **The Closing Judgment**

Most of professing Christianity is FAKE, so such people will not be taken to Heaven in the Rapture. Instead, professing Christians will enter into the Great Tribulation period with the world to suffer the wrath of God (Revelation chapters 6 through 19). The world will worship the Antichrist (Rev. 13), and they

will end up in Hell. Many will be saved in the Tribulation (Rev. 7:14), but most will not (II Ths. 2:3-12).

## **VII. THE DISPENSATION OF THE KINGDOM**

After the Tribulation Christ will return from heaven with His saints to establish the 1000-year kingdom, commonly referred to as “the Millennium.” This is a literal and physical kingdom with Jesus Christ Himself sitting in Jerusalem as the King, a subject which we’ve covered in a previous lesson.

### **Beginning**

The Millennium begins in Revelation 20:4-6 after Jesus has destroyed the wicked, the Antichrist and the False Prophet, and after Satan has been “bound” in the bottomless pit for 1000 years.

### **Man’s Responsibility**

The duty of man in the coming kingdom will be to obey and worship Christ. Zechariah 14:8-21 says, **“And it shall be in that day, that living waters shall go out from Jerusalem; half of them toward the former sea, and half of them toward the hinder sea: in summer and in winter shall it be. And the LORD shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall there be one LORD, and his name one. All the land shall be turned as a plain from Geba to Rimmon south of Jerusalem: and it shall be lifted up, and inhabited in her place, from Benjamin’s gate unto the place of the first gate, unto the corner gate, and from the tower of Hananeel unto the king’s winepresses. And men shall dwell in it, and there shall be no more utter destruction; but Jerusalem shall be safely inhabited. And this shall be the plague wherewith the LORD will smite all the people that have fought against Jerusalem; Their flesh shall consume away while they stand upon their feet, and their eyes shall consume away in their holes, and their tongue shall consume away in their mouth. And it shall come to pass in that day, that a great tumult from the LORD shall be among**

**them; and they shall lay hold every one on the hand of his neighbour, and his hand shall rise up against the hand of his neighbour. And Judah also shall fight at Jerusalem; and the wealth of all the heathen round about shall be gathered together, gold, and silver, and apparel, in great abundance. And so shall be the plague of the horse, of the mule, of the camel, and of the ass, and of all the beasts that shall be in these tents, as this plague. And it shall come to pass, that every one that is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall even go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the feast of tabernacles. And it shall be, that whoso will not come up of all the families of the earth unto Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, even upon them shall be no rain. And if the family of Egypt go not up, and come not, that have no rain; there shall be the plague, wherewith the LORD will smite the heathen that come not up to keep the feast of tabernacles. This shall be the punishment of Egypt, and the punishment of all nations that come not up to keep the feast of tabernacles. In that day shall there be upon the bells of the horses, HOLINESS UNTO THE LORD; and the pots in the LORD'S house shall be like the bowls before the altar. Yea, every pot in Jerusalem and in Judah shall be holiness unto the LORD of hosts: and all they that sacrifice shall come and take of them, and seethe therein: and in that day there shall be no more the Canaanite in the house of the LORD of hosts.”**

The saints from the Tribulation and the Church Age will reign with Christ in the Kingdom (II Tim. 2:11-13; Luke 19:11-27; Rev. 20:4), but the rest of the world will be in subjection to Christ's authority, with Israel as the head of all nations (Acts 15:13-17).

Apparently, immediate judgment awaits those who disobey the Lord during the millennium, for Christ rules with a “rod of iron” (Rev. 2:27, 12:5, 19:15). A good example of this is found in Matthew 5:22 where Jesus speaks of a person being in danger of “hell fire” for calling his brother a fool. Paul wasn't worried about this (I Cor. 15:36), but a person in the kingdom needs to be. The millennial kingdom will be a moral and righteous dictatorship.



## God's Attribute

Since this will be a righteous kingdom, God's primary attribute will be righteousness. Hebrews 1:8 says, "**But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom.**" (Also see Isaiah 11:1-9) Man will be shown the RIGHT way to live and the RIGHT way to govern himself. This will produce 1000 years of world peace, something man has never known.

## Man's Test and Failure

Surely men could honor God if they SEE him sitting on the throne in Jerusalem! Surely no one would rebel against the Lord after He has destroyed the wicked and established himself as King of Kings! However, we read in Revelation 20:7-9: "**And when the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison, And shall go out to deceive the nations which are in the four quarters of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle: the number of whom is as the sand of the sea. And they went up on the breadth of the earth, and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city: and fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them.**" Man, after 1000 years of peace and prosperity, chooses to rebel against the Lord, proving beyond any shadow of a doubt that Psalm 39:5 is absolutely correct: ". . . verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Selah." Rather than obey and worship Christ, men ATTACK Him! But this time He doesn't turn the other cheek.

## **The Closing Judgment:**

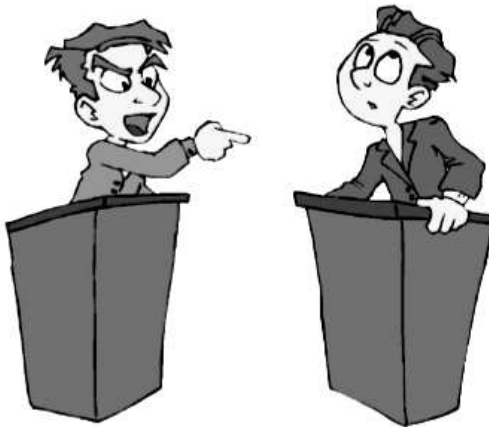
First, the fire falls from Heaven and devours those who rebel against the Lord, then the world stands before the Lord at the White Throne Judgment to be judged and condemned (I Cor. 11:32; Rev. 20:11-15). This will be the final judgment on all of the wicked from all ages. Those not recorded in the Lamb's Book of Life will be cast into the Lake of Fire.

Like all other dispensations, the Millennium ends in apostasy. Man had his seventh chance to prove himself, and he

failed. He is a hopeless creature without Christ, so he ends up in a hopeless place forever.

Although dispensational truth is a Bible reality, this truth should not be used to ignore parts of God's word or to promote discord and strife among God's people. All Scripture is **"given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness"** (II Tim. 3:16), so we have not been authorized by the Lord to claim that this or that verse or passage is "not for us." We have rather been told to study and discern *how* it is for us, rather than to ignore it all together. The next section will focus on this in more detail.

You say you don't believe  
in dispensations . . .



*yet you're wearing clothes, you don't live  
outdoors, you don't sacrifice animals,  
you have no temple, you aren't building an  
ark, and you don't keep the Sabbath!*

# The Application of Scripture

This final section deals with knowing how to *apply* the Scriptures. Almost every passage in the Bible has at least three applications, and some have more. The three basic applications are *historical*, *doctrinal*, and *spiritual*. In a sense, this means that everything in the Bible has more than one meaning, or at least more than one purpose. For instance, Paul stated that **“whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.”** (Rom. 15:4) The “things” that were written were the things of the Old Testament. He was saying that the Old Testament was written for our learning, even though it was written thousands of years before we were born. The information found in the Old Testament is obviously historical because the people and places were real and the events did happen. But the information also offers a spiritual benefit. By reading the Old Testament, we can learn about God’s holy character and how that He hates sin, thus finding instruction for our own spiritual walk. Good doctrinal applications can also be made, applications that can also be prophetic in nature. For instance, Aaron’s rod that budded (Num. 17) speaks of God’s doctrine of resurrection, both the resurrection of Christ and of all those who believe on Him.

All three basic applications of Scripture must be made regularly, if one is to be a mature and balanced student of Scripture. However, the temptation of many is to make only a spiritual or devotional application and ignore the historical and doctrinal intent. This produces spiritual babies who are often weak and very selfish in their spiritual walk because all they look for in the Bible or in church services is something for *themselves*, or, better yet, something to make them feel better about themselves. To them, the whole Bible is a devotional feel-good book. It exists only for the purpose of helping them to feel good about themselves, so any preacher or teacher that uses it otherwise is viewed by them as an unfit preacher.

Let’s consider a few examples of how all three applications of Scripture are essential. First, we’ll use the case of Moses being banned from the land of promise due to his hitting the rock in the wilderness. Numbers 20:7-12 says,

**“And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Take the rod, and gather thou the assembly together, thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes; and it shall give forth his water, and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock: so thou shalt give the congregation and their beasts drink. And Moses took the rod from before the LORD, as he commanded him. And Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation together before the rock, and he said unto them, Hear now, ye rebels; must we fetch you water out of this rock? And Moses lifted up his hand, and with his rod he smote the rock twice: and the water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their beasts also. And the LORD spake unto Moses and Aaron, Because ye believed me not, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them.”**

Immediately after Israel left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea, they murmured to Moses for not having water to drink. God met this need by miraculously giving them water from a rock after having Moses hit the rock with his rod (Exo. 17:1-7). Several years later the water issue arose again, the people murmured against Moses again, and God chose to give them water from the rock again. However, as our above text states, God wanted Moses to *speak* to the rock this time rather than hit it with the rod. In the heat of anger, Moses ignored God’s specific words and hit the rock twice. They got their water, since God is a merciful God, but Moses was banned from the land of promise for doing this.

Now, let’s apply all of this. *Historically*, this event did happen the way God said it happened. Anyone writing a history of Israel would have to include this event.

*Spiritually*, numerous lessons can be learned from this. Don’t take action in the heat of anger is a good lesson. Another one is that you can always count on people to have doubts and voice their complaints when they ought to have faith and voice their praises. Also, one should be encouraged by the fact that when God does something He does it “abundantly” (vs. 11). But the greatest spiritual truth in the story is the fact that Paul said,

**“that Rock was Christ”** in I Corinthians 10:4. The whole verse says, **“And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ.”** Now, that Rock (notice the capital “R”) was not literally Christ; it was just a rock. But, in type, it was Christ. That is, it was a picture or an illustration of Christ. The water from the Rock pictured life coming from Christ. Smiting the Rock the first time (Exo. 17:6) was appropriate because this pictured Christ being smitten at Calvary, but God specified that the Rock was not to be smitten again. This is because Christ died for sins *once* in a cruel event that was to never be repeated. Hebrews 9:28 says, **“So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation.”** We read in Hebrews 10:12, **“But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God.”** Today, sinners are to be saved by *speaking* to the Rock, by calling on the name of the Lord. Romans 10:13 says, **“For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”** By hitting the Rock in Numbers 20:11, Moses broke the type, thus marring God’s beautiful painting, so he was banned from the promised land.

Yet, there is also a very strong *doctrinal* application in this story. Moses had to be banned from the promised land because Moses was the law-giver and **“by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.”** (Gal. 2:16). Had Moses gone into the promised land after giving the law to Israel, that would picture a man being saved by the works of the law. So, it was necessary that someone else lead the Israelites into the land. That someone was Joshua, a type of Christ, and a man whose name means “Jehovah saves,” as does the name “Jesus.”

So, what appears to be an insignificant story from the book of Numbers turns out to be a story loaded with valuable information for believers today, and this information is discovered by making various applications of Scripture.

Another good example of how Scripture can have more than one application is Isaiah 7:14: **“Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”** Historically, the prophecy refers to Mahershalalhashbaz, the child that is born in Isaiah 8:3, but the doctrinal reference is to the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ. We know this from Matthew’s comments in Matthew 1:22-23: **“Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a**

**sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”** Various spiritual applications could also be made, such as the virgin church bearing fruit for Christ or God equipping any individual believer to do seemingly impossible things. Prophetically, the verse could even have some reference to Israel bringing forth the 144,000 in the Tribulation Period (Isa. 66:7-8; Rev. 12:1-2; 14:1-5). However, the primary reference is the doctrinal reference to the Virgin Birth of Jesus.

A third example of Scripture application, and a very good one, is Hosea 11:1: **“When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt.”** It would seem that this verse has only one application: God leading the Israelites out of Egypt in the book of Exodus. Historically, that is the proper application, but Matthew tells us that the verse also has a doctrinal/prophetic application to Jesus: **“When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt: And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son.”** (Mat. 2:14-15) This means that when God led Israel out of Egypt He had in His mind the fact that He would one day do the same thing for the child Jesus. That’s the doctrinal application. But there’s also a spiritual application in that Christians are also called “sons” of God in the Bible (John 1:12; I John 3:2; Rom. 8:14, 19), and we have been called out of this world system to live a consecrated life unto the Lord: **“Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you.”** (II Cor. 6:17) Israel was called out, Jesus was called out, and so are we.

Application of Scripture is what makes the Bible so interesting because it also means more than we see at first. By slowing down and meditating on the Scripture, and checking a few cross references, we can see the Bible open up like a gate to a land of treasure, revealing an abundance of precious truths to be discovered.

# **Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth**

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# RIGHTLY DIVIDING

THE WORD OF TRUTH



*MAKING SENSE OUT OF  
DISPENSATIONS AND DIVISIONS*

JAMES L. MELTON