

DISPENSATIONS



THE BIBLE'S TIME DIVISIONS

We often use the word “dispensation(s)” on the website. What is a dispensation? In God’s revelation of Himself to mankind, He uses distinct periods. In each, He reveals progressively more of Himself. This is also called progressive revelation.

A dispensation is an order of government, a system to be followed, or the organisation of a specific time period. The Bible defines seven dispensations, although there are some scholars that see eight (when seeing the Tribulation period as a distinct dispensation), or even nine (when seeing the events in heaven after the millennial kingdom as another dispensation). We never really see that the Bible indicates the end of one and the start of the next. It is seen in the interpretation of the Word as a whole. The study of the dispensations is called Dispensationalism.

Please note that the information below is not meant to be an exhaustive description of the various dispensations. It is intended simply to answer the question about what dispensations are, and how these dispensations are revealed in the Bible. Understanding dispensations allows us to view God’s incredible plan for man, culminating in the rule of Jesus Christ on Earth as the Messiah the nation of Israel has longed for through the past ages. This passes through the stages of innocence in which theocratic rule reigned; innocence lost; human achievement (or the lack thereof), to the return of theocratic rule.

INNOCENCE

The first dispensation, **the dispensation of innocence**, includes all history from Genesis 1:28 (the creation of man) through Genesis 3:24. In this time, with the absence of sin, there was no strife of any kind, and most importantly, no death. Creation was perfect. Man could do whatever he wanted, with the one exception that he was not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Because of the first deception, the devil, in the form of a serpent, conned Eve to take from the tree and eat, and she in turn gave the fruit to Adam. Now that both had sinned, they became aware of their nakedness. The result was that they were driven out of the garden and thus started a life after the fall.

Start : Genesis 1:28

End : Genesis 3:24

CONSCIENCE

After being driven out of the garden, the **next dispensation** of conscience started. Whereas in the previous dispensation man was not ashamed of himself, he was now very aware of his fallen state. He now had to rule himself by his conscience and his will. He had to work and experienced difficulty. Both had immense shortcomings. Without God’s perfect planning and intervention, their efforts failed all the time. It became progressively worse and ended with the flood, in Genesis 8:22. Biblically this dispensation runs from Genesis 4:1 to Genesis 8:22. We note that in this dispensation God was grieved that He made man because of their evil ways. Even worse, as a result of the fall, sexual sin became prevalent. Even today we have not progressed in any way and sexual sin has become one of the best weapons the deceiver

uses to derail us. In this time, fallen angels had intercourse with women and their offspring giants called the Nephilim, as shown in Genesis 6:1. In the end, God decided to end it all with the Flood, killing all life on Earth except for Noah and his family, and the selection of beings allowed in the ark. Once they had exited the ark, Noah prepared a burnt offering which pleased the Lord.

Start : Genesis 4:1
End : Genesis 8:22

HUMAN GOVERNMENT

Has any form of human government ever yielded long-term success? Certainly if we look around us, this has never happened. In the **third dispensation** God made a promise to the survivors of the flood that He would never destroy the Earth with water again. He also promised a future where His people would live in harmony. There are some definite changes that took place in this dispensation, one being that for the first time, man was allowed to eat meat. In addition, capital punishment was introduced. Instead of filling the Earth as God had instructed them, mankind decided to rather group together and build a tower as a defiant gesture of solidarity against the Creator. This is recorded in Genesis 11:1. In a rather humorous twist, God confused their languages, got them upset with one another, the tower was never completed, and the result was a forced separation to form new cultures.

Start : Genesis 9:1
End : Genesis 11:9

PROMISE

The dispensation of human government was bound to fail, and it lasted until the call of Abraham, which started **the fourth dispensation**. God called Abraham and promised that He would make him a great nation. The lives of the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, are central in this dispensation. In a way this dispensation can be separated into two parts. The first part is from the calling of Abram to leave the land of the Chaldees. This continues through the lives of Isaac and Jacob. Once Jacob reaches Egypt, the second part starts, which is a period of some 430 years. God promised Abraham that He would give him his own land to live in. This is found in Genesis 12:1. The promise was fulfilled when they left Egypt, into the wilderness, and a 40 year sojourn before reaching the promised land.

Start : Genesis 12:1
End : Exodus 19 (Approximate, as the discussion of the law follows in Exodus 20:1 onwards.)

LAW

God gave the law to Moses in the desert (Exodus 20). Some 1500 years later, Jesus Christ would be crucified. During this time as the **fifth dispensation**, God's law would guide mankind to do the right thing, if only they would obey. From the time the law was given, almost the entire Old Testament is devoted to the law. The entry into Canaan and conquering the tribes living there, the judges, the kings, the prophets – all of this history falls within this period. Despite there being some good people who tried to obey the law, the law in itself could not lead anyone to righteousness and led to the Saviour of the world to be sent.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. – John 3:16

Note that the dispensation of the law continued into the New Testament as much of the gospels deal with Mosaic law and the presence of Jesus Christ to show a new way and to be the sacrificial lamb, depicted when Israel left Egypt and spread the blood on the doorposts so that the angel of death would pass them by.

Start : Exodus 20
End : Matthew 28:6; Mark 16:6; Luke 24:6; and John 20:14

GRACE

The **sixth dispensation**, that of grace started with the resurrection of Jesus Christ and continues to this day. This is also called the new covenant in which we have salvation through His blood. Since we are currently in this dispensation, we do not know at which specific time it will end, other than to know that it ends at the occurrence of the rapture, the event in which all believers in Jesus Christ, whether currently alive or already passed on, will be transformed and taken to heaven. Once the dispensation of grace nears the end, the seven year period of tribulation starts. This is primarily aimed at restoring Israel, but with great peril and a war the likes of which has not been experienced before.

There are some who want to classify the seven year tribulation period as a dispensation of its own. We are of the opinion that it is part of the dispensation of grace extends into the tribulation period as in this time, man will still have the chance to repent and be saved, this extending the grace of God through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Start : Matthew 28:6; Mark 16:6; Luke 24:6; and John 20:14 (Based on the writers' account of the resurrection and the point where the angel announced that Jesus had risen from the dead.)
End : Indicated and assumed by many writers: John 14:6; 1 Corinthians 15:51; 1 Thessalonians 4:16; Titus 2:13

All references refer to the coming of Jesus Christ in the air to gather the Church before the start of the tribulation.

THE MILLENNIUM

Once Jesus Christ returns to Earth to finally deal with sin, and ends human government, He defeats the forces of the Antichrist; takes over and for a period of 1000 years and reigns on Earth as the King that the nation of Israel always wanted, and needed. After the 1000 year kingdom has ended, eternity begins.

Start : Revelation 20:1; Revelation 20:4
End : Revelation 20:15

CONCLUSION

As you read the information, you can see God's plan for man unfold in every successive stage. Man has proven that he cannot rule by himself. Israel needs a Saviour and a King, and the seven year tribulation period prepares the way for Jesus to return, defeat the enemy, and set up His millennial kingdom.