

The Doctrine of the End Times

WEEK 3: Overview of Dispensationalism

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

- The word “eschatology” comes from the Greek adjective ἐσχατος (“last”) and refers to the study of “last things” or “end times.”
- More specifically, it refers to the study of biblical prophecy about the future events surrounding the end of the age when the Lord Jesus Christ returns to earth to bring about the restoration of all things.
- The study of the end times has brought with it much debate on the timing and the means by which biblical prophecy will be fulfilled. Topics such as the timing of the rapture, the understanding of the Millennial Kingdom, Dispensationalism, and Covenant Theology are all connected to eschatology.
- Because of this, we will take time over the next six weeks to unpack some of the major end times issues, as well as the implications of those in how we approach and interpret Scripture.
- Our schedule will look like this:
 - Week 1: Introduction to the Doctrine of the End Times
 - Week 2: Overview of Covenant Theology
 - **Week 3: Overview of Dispensationalism**
 - Week 4: Views on the Millennial Kingdom
 - Week 5: Why There Needs to be a Millennial Kingdom
 - Week 6: What is the Day of the Lord?

INTRODUCTION

- As mentioned previously, this class will be focusing in on some of the key end times issues, looking to discern the truth biblically, through faithful hermeneutical principles and rooted in exegesis.
- Specifically, as we did last week, we are going to continue looking at two theological systems that have developed to try and understand how God has been working throughout redemptive history, detailing:
 - The key eschatological implications of these systems
 - The main tenets and distinctions between them
 - Key passages used to defend these systems
 - Biblical critiques of each system

- Put simply, as we come to these theological systems, we want to have the mindset of the Bereans, “*examining the Scriptures to see whether these things [are] so.*” (Acts 17:11)
- Today, we will be unpacking and seeking to understand Dispensationalism.

WHAT IS DISPENSATIONALISM?

- To understand what Dispensationalism is as a theological system, we first need to understand the term “dispensation”.
- “Dispensation” comes from the Greek word *oikonomia*, a compound word based on two other Greek words: *oikos*, which means “house”, and *nemō*, which means “to manage”.
 - This word communicates the idea of an economy or stewardship where someone who has authority delegates duties to another entity that exists as a subordinate.
 - It may be defined as a stewardship, administration, oversight, or management of others’ property, where the subordinate party is given information to carry out any given responsibilities and is held accountable for what does.
 - It involves responsibility, accountability, and faithfulness on the part of the steward, with reward for faithfully carrying out the duties given, and failure potentially bringing about a change in this stewardship.
- Some New Testament uses of the word *oikonomia* include:
 - **Luke 16:1-4** – *Now He was also saying to the disciples, “There was a rich man who had a manager, and this manager was reported to him as squandering his possessions. “And he called him and said to him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an accounting of your management, for you can no longer be manager.’ “The manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg. ‘I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the management people will welcome me into their homes.’*
 - **1 Corinthians 9:17** – *For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me.*
 - **Ephesians 3:8-9** – *To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things;*
 - **1 Timothy 1:3-4** – *As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus so that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines, nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering the administration of God which is by faith.*
- With this understanding of a dispensation as a stewardship, we can begin to frame up a working definition of Dispensationalism as a theological system.

- As a system of theology, dispensationalism views a dispensation as “*a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose.*”¹
 - God is the ultimate authority who works to reveal His purposes to mankind and delegates responsibilities to them as stewards.
 - Dispensationalism holds that throughout redemptive history, God has been working through a number of divinely established stewardships, or dispensations.
 - “Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In His household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the passage of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose, and these different economies constitute the dispensations. The understanding of God’s differing economies is essential to a *proper interpretation of His revelation* within those various economies.”²
- A number of unique features characterize the various economies in the outworking of God’s purpose.
- Although features from one dispensation may be incorporated into subsequent dispensations, each dispensation has features that are clearly unique to it.
- The following elements distinguish one dispensation each the other:
 - Primary Characteristics:
 - A change in God’s governmental relationship with man
 - A resultant change in man’s responsibility
 - Corresponding revelation necessary to effect the change (i.e. a new stage in the progressive of revelation)
 - In short, a dispensationalist is one who recognizes that God deals differently with people in different ages.
- One final thing to note before we look at the dispensations themselves, as well as the theological implications of them, is understanding what a dispensation is **NOT**:
 - A dispensation is not a time period. Whereas a period of time of necessity is involved, a dispensation is a stewardship or administration of God in this world.³
 - The implication being that there is discontinuity in the dispensations of redemptive history, not in respect to time, but in respect to the requirements of God to His appointed stewards (Administration in the time of Adam vs. Moses vs. Paul, etc.)
 - These different dispensations are not different ways of salvation. God’s salvation has always been by grace based on the finished work of Christ. Dispensations are not ways of salvation, but different ways God administers His rule in this world.⁴

¹ Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach*, 82.

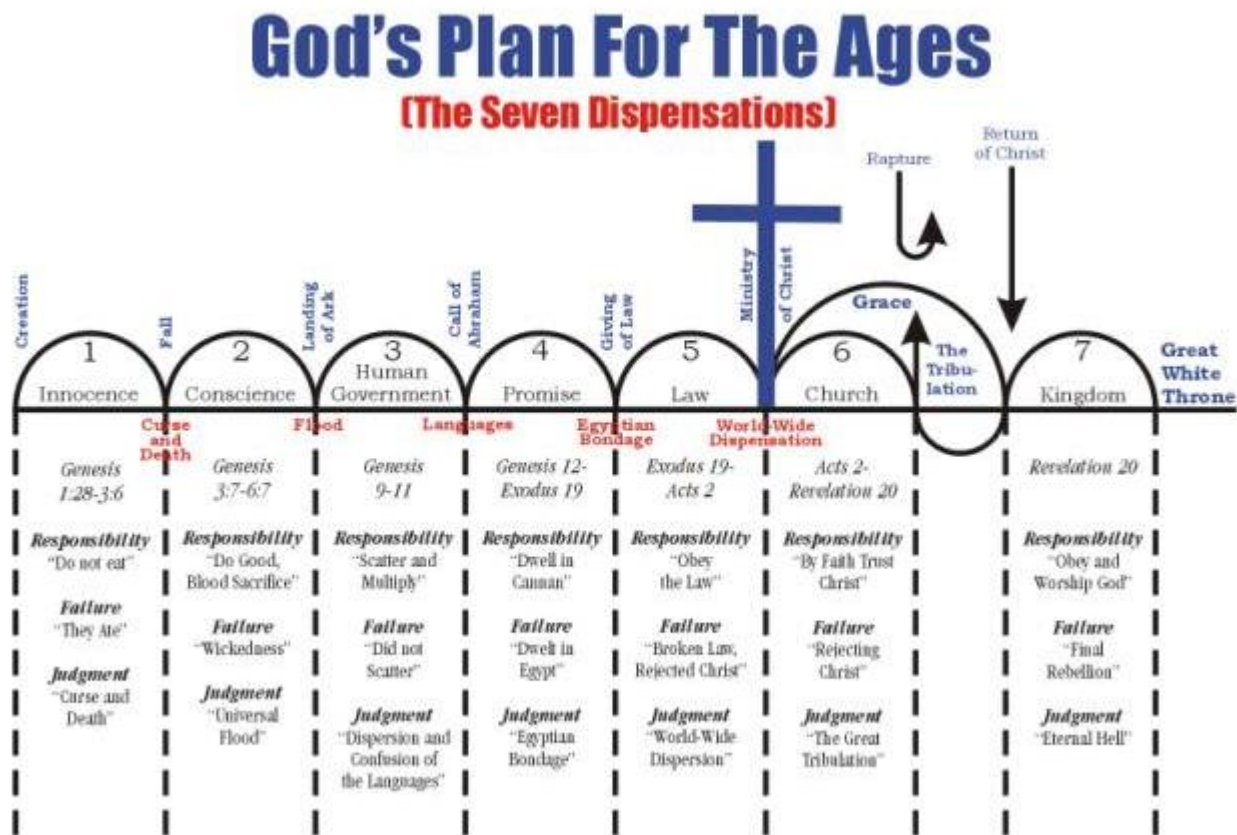
² Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 28.

³ Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach*, 83.

⁴ Ibid, 82.

WHAT ARE THE KEY TENETS OF DISPENSATIONALISM?

I. The “Dispensations” of Dispensationalism



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- While there is some discrepancy amongst theologians, most hold that there are seven distinct dispensations throughout redemptive history.
 - **1. Innocence/Pre-fall (Genesis 1:28-3:6)** – Adam and Eve were in a state of unconfirmed holiness, they were given the command to not eat from the tree, however they ate, resulting in judgment in the form of the curse.
 - **2. Conscience (Genesis 3:7-8:14)** – The conscience (Romans 2:15) was the primary way God governed mankind during this economy; during this time man was responsible to respond to God through his conscience, however, mankind was wicked (Gen 6:5), which resulted in judgment in the form of a worldwide flood.
 - **3. Government (Genesis 8:15-11:9)** – The new revelation of Noah's time included animals given to man to eat, the promise of no further floods, and the institution of capital punishment. They were commanded to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 9:7), however mankind disobeyed, resulting in the scattering of the people at Babel, as well as the confusion of language.

⁵ <https://presenttruthmn.com/the-present-truth/teachings/original-faith/seven-dispensations/>

- **4. Promise/Patriarchs (Genesis 11:10-Exodus 18:27)** – Until this dispensation, God related to mankind directly; now God marked out one family and one nation to carry out His purposes. Through Abraham, they were given the land to dwell in, however, they came to dwell in Egypt, leading to judgment through bondage in Egypt.
- **5. Mosaic Law (Exodus 19:1-Acts 1:26)** – The law was given as a constitution to the nation Israel and was in force until the death of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Israel was called to obey this law as a conditional covenant with the Lord, however, they broke this covenant, resulting in judgment to the nation of Israel in dispersion throughout the world.
- **6. Church/Grace (Acts 2:1-Revelation 19:21)** – Although grace is in operation in every age, it is uniquely so in the coming of Christ since it is through Christ that God made His grace known to all mankind. This began with the giving of the Spirit and the inauguration of the church, calling all to faith in Christ. Rejection of Christ will result in judgment at Christ's return.
- **7. Millennium (Revelation 20:7-9)** – After the return of Christ the millennial kingdom will be set up in fulfillment of all the promises given throughout Scripture and particularly those contained in the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. Christ will be the chief personage of the dispensation, running of the affairs of the world during that age. It will continue for a thousand years, and man will be responsible for obedience to the King and His laws. Satan will be bound, Christ will be ruling, righteousness will prevail, overt disobedience will be quickly punished. There will, however, be those who rebel against Christ (Rev. 20:7-9). The revolt will be unsuccessful, and the rebels will be cast into the lake of fire.

- These economies serve as a framework for how God has been working throughout history.

II. Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism

- Dispensationalism emphasizes a literal, historical, grammatical method of interpretation in all genres of Scripture (including prophetic passages).
- “The word literal is perhaps not as good as either the word normal or plain, but in any case it is interpretation that does not spiritualize or allegorize as non-dispensational interpretation often does...To be sure, literal/ historical/grammatical interpretation is not the sole possession or practice of dispensationalists, but the consistent use of it in all areas of biblical interpretation is. This does not preclude or exclude correct understanding of types, illustrations, apocalypses, and other genres within the basic framework of literal interpretation.”⁶
- Thus, the meaning of OT passages is anchored in the OT passages themselves.
 - Rather than assuming that the NT is the interpreter of the OT as Covenant Theologians do, Dispensationalists begin with a literal understanding of each OT text.
 - The key issue relates to authorial intent: What did the prophetic author intend?

⁶ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 28.

- This allows for the biblical writer to use symbolic language, but insists that any interpretation must be based on the author's intent.
 - While it is acknowledged that many prophetic passages do contain figurative language and that they are often written in poetic style, one must question whether the method for interpreting prophecy should be distinct from the method for interpreting other kinds of biblical literature.
- "Dispensationalism affirms that all details of the Old Testament prophecies, promises, and covenants must be fulfilled in the way the original inspired Bible authors intended. There are no non-literal or spiritual fulfillments of physical and national promises in the Bible. Nor does the New Testament reinterpret, transcend, transform, or spiritualize promises and prophecies in the Old Testament. With dispensationalism, what you see is what you get in the Bible."⁷
 - What is significant with this is that dispensationalism allows for a proper understanding of progressive revelation.
 - Progressive revelation is the recognition that God's message to man was not given in one single act but was unfolded in a series of successive acts and through the minds and hands of many men of varying backgrounds.
 - "It is the marking off of these stages in the revelation of the purpose of God that is the basis for the dispensational approach to the interpretation of the Scriptures."
 - Each dispensation has unique aspects to it that are clearly revealed by God...and new responsibilities are spelled out by new revelation.
 - For example, everyone observes that the requirements and responsibilities for mankind before the Fall of man and after the Fall are distinctly different...the age before the giving of the Mosaic Law and the age after the Law are distinctly different...things are different pre-cross of Christ than they are post-cross.
 - "Progressive revelation views the Bible not as a textbook on theology but as the continually unfolding revelation of God given by various means throughout the successive ages. In this unfolding there are distinguishable stages of revelation when God introduces new things for which man becomes responsible. These stages are the economies, stewardships, or dispensations in the unfolding of His purpose. Dispensationalism, therefore, recognizes both the unity of His purpose and the diversity in the unfolding of it."⁸
 - With Dispensationalism, the various dispensations can stand on their own in terms of interpretation and understanding, while also understanding that the Lord is unfolding His purposes through them.
 - "Covenant theology emphasizes the unity to the point of forcing unwarranted, inconsistent, and contradictory interpretations of the Scriptures."⁹

⁷ Michael Vlach, *Dispensationalism*, 87.

⁸ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 31.

⁹ Ibid, 31.

III. Theological Beliefs of Dispensationalism

1. The Glory of God as the Main Theme of Scripture

- As referenced last week, because their underlying framework for interpreting Scripture are covenants pertaining to the salvation of the elect by God's grace, Covenant Theologians emphasize salvation as the unifying theme of the Bible.
 - Thus, this becomes the lens through which they view all of Scripture.
 - However, while it is true that a major focus of God's redemptive activity in both the Old Testament and New Testament is the redemption of the elect, it is not God's all-inclusive purpose.
 - The ultimate goal of history has to be large enough to incorporate all of what God is doing, not just part of it.
- Therefore, Dispensationalism emphasizes that the unifying theme of the Bible is the glory of God.
- Only this theme is broad enough to encompass all that God is doing in the universe.
 - "To the normative dispensationalist, the soteriological, or saving, program of God is not the only program but one of the means God is using in the total program of glorifying Himself. Scripture is not man-centered as though salvation were the main theme, but it is God-centered because His glory is the center. The Bible itself clearly teaches that salvation, important and wonderful as it is, is not an end in itself but is rather a means to the end of glorifying God (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14). John F. Walvoord, Chafer's successor at Dallas Theological Seminary, puts it this way: 'The larger purpose of God is the manifestation of His own glory. To this end each dispensation, each successive revelation of God's plan for the ages, His dealings with the non-elect as with the elect...combine to manifest divine glory.'"¹⁰
- God is working throughout redemptive history, unfolding His kingdom plan that began with Adam in the garden and will be ultimately fulfilled in Christ's reign as King, and God is working all of this out for the glory and praise of His name.

2. Discontinuity Between Israel and the Church

- While Covenant Theology views the church as a replacement for Israel as God's covenant people (existing as the "true Israel"), Dispensationalism recognizes that Scripture indicates a fundamental distinction between Israel and the Church.
- This stands as one of the greatest distinctions between Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism.

¹⁰ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 40-41.

	Israel	The Church
Type of Nation	Physical Nation	Spiritual Nation
Birth	Originating in Gen 12, becoming a nation in Ex 19-20	Inaugurated in Acts 2
Population	Consisting of Ethnic Jews, including a mixture of believers and unbelievers	Consisting of both Jews and Gentiles in one body of Spirit-baptized believers in Christ
Promises	Earthly (Eze 36:24)	Heavenly (Eph 1:3)
Requirements for Entrance into Nation	In OT Israel, the means of entrance into the nation was involuntary, physical, and external—one became a Jew by being born of Jewish parents.	In the NT Church, the means of entrance is voluntary, spiritual, and internal—one becomes a member of the Church by exercising faith in Christ and being born again by the Holy Spirit.
Temple	Physical (1 Ki 8:11)	Spiritual (1 Cor 3:16-17)
Relationship With Christ	Christ is rejected (1 Pet 2:7-8)	Christ is the Cornerstone (Eph 2:20)

- This fundamental distinction between Israel and the Church can be seen further by noting:
 - **The Consistent Use of “Israel” in the New Testament**
 - All 73 uses of the term “Israel” in the New Testament refer to ethnic Jews—most to the nation as a whole, but others to individual ethnic Jews—including references to the nation as “Israel” even after the establishment of the Church (Acts 3:12; 4:8, 10; 5:21, 31, 35; 21:28).
 - **The Church as a “Mystery” in Ephesians 3:3-6**
 - **Eph 3:3-6** - *...that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel...*
 - Paul states that Jewish and Gentile believers would be united and equal in the church. This was a mystery known only to God, revealed to the NT apostles.
 - Through this, the church is viewed as something new and distinct, dissimilar from Israel in many ways.

- **The NT Writers made Distinction Between Israel and the Church**
 - **1 Cor 10:32** – *Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God;*
 - **Eph 2:11-16** – *Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called “Uncircumcision” by the so-called “Circumcision,” which is performed in the flesh by human hands— remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.*

ESCHATOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF DISPENSATIONALISM

- With all of this in view, how does this affect our eschatology?

1. There is a Future for Ethnic Israel

- From what we have discussed regarding the distinction between Israel and the church, this has massive eschatological implications.
 - If God is faithful and does not forsake His promises to His people, and the church and Israel are two distinct peoples, both given promises by God, then God is not done with Israel!
- Evidence of this is shown in God’s word:
 - **The Present Privileges of Israel in the New Testament**
 - Romans 9:4–5 affirms that the covenants and promises still remain the possession of the nation of Israel even after the inception of the Church, thereby indicating that these blessings have not been absorbed by the Church.
 - **Rom 9:3-5** - *For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.*
 - This passage gives clear indications that the promises of God to Israel have not been discarded or transferred to the church. It belongs to them!

- **The Future Hope of Israel in the New Testament**

- The New Testament reiterates the future restoration of the ethnic nation of Israel as originally promised throughout the Old Testament (Rom 11:26; Acts 1:6-7; Matt 19:28; 23:37-39; Luke 13:34-35; 21:24; 22:30), thereby indicating a distinction between Israel and the Church.
- **Rom 11:1-2, 5** - *I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew...In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice.*
 - This passage indicates that God has preserved a faithful remnant from Israel through His grace.
- **Rom 11:23-24** - *And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?*
 - Paul is reminding the Gentiles that as they were grafted in through the blood of Christ into the New Covenant, Israel, the natural branches of the Covenant promise, can be grafted back in.
- **Rom 11:25-27** - *For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, “THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB.” “THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS.”*
 - Though Israel rejected their Messiah, they will be restored as a nation when the fullness of the Gentiles come to faith.

2. There Will Be a Future Millennial Kingdom

- Because all of the promises to Israel will find literal fulfillment to them, this necessitates a literal, earthly kingdom of Christ.
- This logically leads to Premillennialism...Christ will return to rescue ethnic Israel and set up a literal 1,000-year rule from Jerusalem.
- What is essential to dispensational premillennialism is the belief that the nation Israel is saved and restored with a mediatorial role to other nations in the millennium...this mediatorial role occurs under the headship of Jesus Christ.