

Basic Truth for Young Believers

Stark Road Gospel Hall

August 27, 1997

D.K. Vallance

Topic 8. The Biblical Ages: History and Prophecy

“Distinguish the ages, and the Scriptures harmonize” [Augustine].

I. Introduction

A. Time and eternity. God is not subject to time, as we are. He dwells in eternity, which is outside of time altogether. We must classify our experiences as past, present, or future, but God experiences everything as “now.” Thus God is “still” experiencing all past events, and has “already” experienced all future events. Although this is very difficult to grasp, it explains many biblical paradoxes, e.g. how God could choose us before we were born, and how He could justify Old Testament believers through the death of Christ. Although the OT believers lived before Christ died, God views the death of Christ in the eternal “now.” To God, Calvary has always “been” an accomplished fact.

It may help to think of history as a parade. We humans sit at the curbside somewhere along the parade route, and see each float and each marcher pass by, one at a time. But God has an aerial view: He sees the front, middle, and back of the parade all at once.

B. Human history. The Bible explains the complete history of the human race: past, present, and future. It begins with the creation of the universe (Gen 1:1), and ends with the creation of a new universe (Rev 21:1). Once again, eternity did not “stop” when the universe was created, nor will it “start” again when the new universe is formed. To accommodate our limited minds, however, we speak of the “time” before creation as “eternity past,” and the “time” after the new creation as “eternity future.” The time between these “eternities” is divided into several ages called “dispensations.” Although most of these dispensations are now past, some of the most phenomenal events recorded in the Bible will occur in the dispensations still to come. And beyond them looms eternity.

C. “Dispensationalism.” Dispensationalism is a method of interpretation that divides all of history into distinct periods of time. It is the theological system that most faithfully adheres to a consistent, literal, grammatical, and historical method of interpreting the Bible. The Bible teaches that history is composed of successive ages, and calls God “the King of the ages” (1 Tim 1:17). The Lord Jesus spoke of “this age and the age to come” (Mat 12:32), and of “the end of the age” (Mat 13:39,40,49; 24:3; Mark 10:30). God spoke through the apostles of “ages [plural] past” (Rom 16:25; Col 1:26; Titus 1:2), of “the present evil age” (Gal 1:3), and of “the ends of the ages” (1 Cor 10:11), and “the consummation of the ages” (Heb 9:26). Further, the writer to the Hebrews tells us the Son of God framed or blueprinted the ages (Heb 1:2). So the ages follow a Divine plan and purpose. Before time and space were set into operation, Christ planned and designed the various stages into which man’s history would flow .

Ephesians 3:9-11 is a key text supporting the dispensational method. Here Paul adds an important element to the concept of successive ages. He says that the church is a mystery which has been hidden “in God” from all ages past (Rom 16:25 says the same). Paul is now “bringing to light” the *administration* of this mystery in the present age. The term “world” is literally *ages*--periods of time in history or in the development of man.” In the context this idea is connected with the term “fellowship” (Greek *oikonomia*), which means *administration*, and has been traditionally translated *dispensation*. *Oikonomia* means “to arrange, order, plan, administrate, and manage a household,” and our term “economics” derives from it. So God has planned, ordered, arranged, and administrated the ages.

Dispensationalism teaches that God has administered the various biblical ages in different ways, and primarily involves a sharp distinction between Israel and the church, such that the prophecies made to Old

Testament Israel do not apply to the church today. Some dispensationalists, however, have a tendency to get carried away with compartmentalizing truth to the point that they make unbiblical, artificial distinctions. An almost obsessive desire to categorize everything neatly has led them to draw hard lines not only between Israel and the Church, but also between salvation and discipleship, the Church and the kingdom, Christ's preaching and the apostolic message, faith and repentance, and the age of law and the age of grace. The age of law/age of grace division in particular has wreaked havoc on dispensational theology and contributed to confusion about the doctrine of salvation. There is no fundamental difference between "the gospel of the Kingdom" and "the gospel of the grace of God." God's method of *administration* does change from age to age. E.g. in Matthew 10:5-6 Jesus tells His disciples not to go to the Gentiles or even the Samaritans, but only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. In 28:19, however, He tells His disciples to go into all the world and preach the gospel. Obviously there was a distinguishable change in God's plan. Yet God's basic message to man, and His method of salvation has never changed. All the fundamental things stay the same: Salvation by grace through faith in the word of God, followed by obedience to the word of God. Salvation by Christ (although the fullness of Christ was not clear prior to His coming).

II. The Dispensations.

A dispensation is a biblical age. Taken together, the dispensations exhibit the majestic, progressive order of the dealings of God with humanity. They are not only God's *outline* of human history, but also God's *interpretation* of human history. They look at events from God's perspective, and show God working out His purposes in time. In each dispensation, God places man under special conditions and then tests man's obedience to some specific revelation of His will. Each dispensation thus begins with a fresh revelation from God. The new revelation contains both responsibilities of how man is to relate to God, and promises that enable man to perform them. There is then a period of testing in the new revelations. Each economy reveals human failure both to appropriate the blessings and to obey the revealed responsibilities. Each economy ends with a distinct divine judgment upon man for his failure, and then a new economy is introduced. Although man fails in every dispensation, God also moves in grace in every age. He brings Christ into each dispensation, either in picture or in reality, and Christ brings salvation. Let us now acquire a "God's-eye view" of where we are in the plan of the ages, and then look into the future.

1. The Dispensation of Freedom or Innocence (Genesis 1-3).

Background: God created Adam in a state of innocence, and placed him in a beautiful garden called Eden. He made a fit companion for the man (Gen 2:18,21) and established the institution of marriage (2:24). He made man and all the animals vegetarian (Gen 1:29-30). Suffering and death were unknown.

Revelation: Forbidden fruit. God gave man the duty to propagate the race, subdue the earth, and rule over the animal kingdom (Gen 1:28). Adam was to dress and keep the garden, enjoy its fruit, and walk in fellowship with God. God planted two special trees in the garden (Gen 2:9), and instructed man not to eat of the fruit of one of them, "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (2:16-17).

Testing: God gave man one prohibition so that man could demonstrate his desire to honor and obey his Creator. Adam had no inward compulsion to sin. But God desired loving worship and obedience from man, and thus He gave Adam freedom of choice: A person must be free to choose *not* to love in order to be able to love. Adam was not a robot; his freedom of choice meant that the possibility of sin always existed. Adam failed the test (Gen 3:6). The serpent, an incarnation of Satan, influenced Adam and Eve to believe a lie about God's character and to doubt His Word, yet Adam alone bore the responsibility for choosing to disbelieve and disobey.

Judgment: Expulsion from Eden. Man, created in *innocence*, rebelled against his Creator, and brought ruin to the entire human race. God cursed the serpent, the woman, the man, and the earth. Man died spiritually (became morally separated from God) and became subject to physical death. He lost his innocence and acquired a sinful nature that could never please God again. He was cast out of paradise.

2. The Dispensation of Conscience or Self-Determination (Genesis 3-7).

Background. Adam and Eve had eaten fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and so they became aware of the difference between good and evil. Because of Adam's disobedience, they were now thoroughly sinful, and yet their God-given moral reason (conscience) remained. The result of this was an acute sense of shame (Gen 3:7), fear (3:10), and guilt (3:12). Instead of fleeing back to God for mercy, however, they hid from God and tried to cover their sense of guilt with the work of their own hands (fig leaves sewn together). This was the first act of religion, for religion is man's attempt to cover his sin by his own works.

Revelation: Substitution by the death of an innocent animal, which pointed forward to the coming "Seed of the woman." Despite the awful wreckage and judgment in Eden, God immediately provided a way of forgiveness. He promised a coming Redeemer (Gen 3:15), and called for blood sacrifice (Heb 9:22). The sacrifices looked forward to Christ's future redemption. God Himself killed the first animal (Gen 3:21). He made Adam and Eve coats of skin to cover their nakedness, which was their first awareness of guilt. The coats were a physical symbol of covering (atoning for) sin. God thereafter would require them to offer blood sacrifices.

Testing. During this age, man was responsible to live up to his conscience. He was to respond to God through his inner sense of right and wrong, and to obey God's requirement for sacrifice. But man failed miserably to control his sin by conscience. He learned to sear and quench his conscience, to rationalize his sin, to make white black and black white. Within one generation, murder was committed (Gen 4:8), and by the time the seventh generation appeared (Jud 14,15), evil filled the earth: "Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart were only evil continually (Gen 6:5). The age of conscience lasted for about 1650 years after Adam fell.

Judgment: The worldwide flood. Man, guided by *conscience* alone, was unable to produce anything but evil. The great flood resulted. Man's failure to live up to his conscience resulted in this worldwide judgment. Only eight people were saved by grace through faith in the word of God.

3. The Dispensation of Civil Government (Genesis 8-11).

Background. Man had now failed two periods of testing under which individuals dealt with God personally and directly. After the flood, God instituted human government--the government of man by man.

Revelation. God gave man explicit instructions for governing the earth for Him. Man was still, of course, to propagate the race (Gen 9:1), but his dominion over the animal kingdom would now be by fear rather than by right (9:2). Meat was added to man's diet (9:3), and the right of government to execute capital offenders was established (9:5-6). This ultimate authority endowed human government with all lesser authority necessary for governing the world. Human government became the divine means of maintaining order. It also included the way of preserving and proclaiming the message of salvation and the way to walk with God. God continued to accept blood sacrifices for sin (Gen 8:20-21).

Testing. Although man was responsible again to fill the earth during this period, his response was defiance, pride, arrogance, and idolatry (Gen 11:4). Instead of dispersing and subduing the earth as God had commanded, the people banded together in one place. Soon, the first world dictator arose, Nimrod (Gen 10:8-12; 11:1-9), and then led the people into the first system of false religion. This new religion was heavily devoted to astrology. The people built a tower at Babel (which later became the site of Babylon). This tower, apparently an observatory for studying the stars, became a symbol of man's unified opposition to God. Man thus used civil government to unite the people in a system of false religion and to stamp out the truth of God.

Judgment: The confusion of languages and resultant dispersion from Babel. Man, under his own *government*, became arrogant, and the confusion of languages was necessary to slow the development of evil in the earth. Before this judgment, everyone on the earth spoke the same language (Gen 11:1), which made it relatively easy to implement whatever wicked schemes man's depraved heart devised. In fact, wickedness once again filled the earth, so God moved in one stroke to slow its growth and to judge man's failure to govern himself properly (11:7). Mankind was scattered over the earth (11:8).

4. The Dispensation of Israel under Promise (Genesis 12:1-Exodus 18:27).

Background. After Babel, the nations deliberately pushed the knowledge of God and the way of salvation out of their minds (Rom 1:18-32). God therefore created a special nation in order to preserve and propagate His truth on the earth. The Bible will explain the structure and history of the following dispensations more precisely than it distinguished the features of the first three economies. Genesis covers the first three dispensations (several thousand years of human history) in a brief span of eleven chapters. But Genesis 12 draws our attention to one man, Abram of Ur. From Genesis 12 to Acts 2, the Scripture will deal primarily with Abram's physical descendants (through his son Isaac), the nation of Israel.

Revelation. This economy deals with a people and a promise. God made sweeping promises to Abram, and bound Himself with an oath to keep each promise. God's sealed His covenant with Abram symbolically through blood sacrifices (Gen 15:9-17). God promised (1) to make Abram a great nation (Gen 12:2), (2) to preserve Abram and his descendants (12:3), (3) to bless the world through Abram's Seed (12:3), (4) to give Abram's family a specific land (13:14-17; 15:18-21). As a token of His promise, the Lord changed Abram's name to Abraham (Gen 17:5). God later confirmed His promises to both Isaac (26:2-4) and Jacob (28:13-14). Jacob was later called Israel.

Testing. The responsibility of the patriarchs was simply to believe and serve God. The Lord gave them every material and spiritual provision to encourage them to do this. God's assured them of blessing as long as they stayed in their promised land. From the outset, Abraham believed God (Gen 15:6), although at times he failed to act in accord with his faith (Gen 16:2-4). But God, who is faithful, remained true to His promises, and a son was born to Abraham in his old age (Gen 21:2-3). But failure followed in Abraham's offspring is full of flaws. Jacob deceptively stole the blessing from his twin brother Esau (Gen 27:19), and then was sent away by his mother to thwart Esau's revenge (27:42-43). Jacob sired twelve sons by two wives and their maids (Gen 35:23-26). His sons sold their second youngest brother, Joseph, into slavery (Gen 37:28). Eventually, Jacob and his entire clan ended up in Egypt (Gen 46:26). About 400 years later, the family had grown to about 2 million, but they were in bondage, slaves to the Egyptians (Ex 1:11). Man, given *promises* by God, failed to live up to his faith, and ended in slavery in a foreign land.

Judgment. The giving of the law. Some have questioned whether the giving of the law is really a judgment, and whether the Bible really distinguishes two dispensations in God's dealing with Israel, since the promises and the law were given to the same people. But Paul clarifies this for us: "Why the law then? It was added because of transgressions..." (Gal 3:19). The people failed to live by faith in the promises God had given them (Num 14:11,22,23), so God placed them under specific laws.

5. The Dispensation of Israel under Law (Exodus 18:28 through the Tribulation).

Background. This dispensation begins with a frightening manifestation of God at Mount Sinai. God reviewed for the people how He had faithfully kept His promises to them in spite of their failure (Ex 19:4). With "a mighty hand and outstretched arm" He had delivered His people from Egypt (Ex 12:29-32).

Revelation. Through Moses, God gave Israel His Law, including the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:1-17) and a complete system of blood sacrifices.

Testing. Some believe that God did not *impose* His law on Israel, but simply *proposed* it (Ex 19:5). Had Israel turned down this offer of a law relationship, and instead asked to remain under the gracious economy of promise which depended upon God answering faith, then the Lord would not have forced this change. But instead the people reacted with pride and said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do!" (19:8). Over the next 1520 years Israel proceeded to break, repeatedly, every one of God's commands. Still, God graciously offered Israel the Messianic Kingdom through Christ, and they responded by crucifying Him.

Judgment. Although God has punished Israel for continually breaking His law, the final judgment will come in the last half of the seven-year Tribulation. God's judgment on Israel for failing to keep the Law began with their captivity to Babylon (2 Chron 36:20), included the destruction of a rebuilt Jerusalem by the Roman general Titus in 70 A.D. (Luke 21:24), and has continued in waves of anti-Semitism since then. Israel's rejection of the Messiah caused God to set aside Israel and to suspend the dispensation of law *temporarily*. According to Daniel 9:24-27, Israel still has allotted to her seven years to complete the responsibilities cited in verse 24. These are to be fulfilled under the same conditions that prevailed in which the first 483 years were acted out, namely, the law of Moses. The seven-year Tribulation is actually the completion of the economy of law.

6. The Dispensation of the Church under Grace (the current parenthesis).

Background. After the crucifixion of Christ, God temporarily suspended His dealings with the nation of Israel. In the era of grace, there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile in this age (Rom 10:12). After passing through five dispensations, the human race is currently in this dispensation of grace. This dispensation was unknown in Old Testament times. It had to be, or there simply could not have been a bona fide offer of the Messianic Kingdom to Israel.

Revelation. "The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). The age of grace begins with the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom 3:24-26; 4:24-25). The gospel of the grace of God. We are not under law in this age, but under grace (Rom 6:14).

Testing. The point of testing is no longer legal obedience, but acceptance or rejection of Christ, with good works the fruit of salvation (John 1:12-13; 3:36; Mat 21:27; 22:42; John 15:22-25; Heb 1:2; 1 John 5:10-12). The sole responsibility placed upon man is to obey the gospel (John 6:29), that is, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. At the moment of salvation, those who truly are joined with Christ through the baptism in the Holy Spirit, which took place in Acts 2 (1 Cor 12:12-14). While salvation has always been by grace through faith, union with Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit are unique to this age (1 Cor 6:19-20; John 14:16-17; Rom 8:11). The Holy Spirit under grace now works the righteousness of the law through the trusting believer (Rom 8:4).

Judgment. Man, under *grace*, continues to rebel and refuses to obey the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Despite the great privileges of this age, the professing church will fall away from the faith (1 Tim 4:1-4). Organized Christendom will have an outward facade of godliness, but will deny its power (2 Tim 3:1-10). Judgment is pending (2 Thes 1:8). This dispensation ends with the Rapture of the church (see below), which .

7. The Dispensation of the Kingdom, or Millennium (Revelation 20).

Background. After the Rapture of the church, the world will enter a seven year period called the Tribulation. The Rapture concludes the dispensation of Grace, while the Tribulation resumes the dispensation of Law for its final seven years. The second coming of Christ to earth ends "the time of Jacob's distress," and ushers in the Millennial Kingdom promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Lord Jesus Christ will reign as King of all the earth (Rev 19). His actual residence, however, will apparently be *over* the earth, with His bride the Church. Old Testament and Tribulation believers likely will be raised at the outset of this period, and will rule with Christ and His Bride.

Revelation. Satan will be bound for the thousand years, and Christ will rule over the whole earth and set the atmosphere of the world system with righteousness. The curse of nature will be removed and man will have a perfect environment once more (Isa 11; 65:17-25; Amos 9:8-15; Micah 4:1-8; Zech 14:16-21).

Testing. Man will be expected to live out the standards of the Messiah. Only believers in Christ will enter the Kingdom, but their children will need to be saved. Sadly, even in the ideal conditions set by the benevolent reign of Christ Himself, many will refuse to believe. Evidence of unbelief will show up early in the Millennium (e.g. Zech 14:17-19). Rebellion will fester in the hearts of these people until the end of the thousand years. At that time, God will release Satan, who will quickly raise up an army of unbelievers.

Judgment. Man, in a *kingdom* ruled by the Lord Jesus Himself, will once again will rebel against God. This is the final proof that *environment* is not man's problem. *Man* is the problem, and therefore salvation must be by God's grace *alone*. Christ will smash this final rebellion immediately and decisively (Rev 20:7-10). He will translate all mortal believers into immortality. He will then raise the remaining dead, judge them according to their works at the Great White Throne, and cast them into the Lake of Fire (Rev 20).

III. The Day of Christ

The Day of Christ (1 Cor 1:8; 5:5; 2 Cor 1:14; Phil 1:6,10; 2:16) is His return to the air for His people (the Rapture), and their subsequent return to heaven with him, the judgment seat of Christ, and the marriage supper of the Lamb. The Day of Christ brings reward and blessing to the saints at His coming.

A. The Rapture.

The hallmark of dispensational eschatology is that the second coming occurs in two stages. The first is the rapture, a "catching away" of the church, which occurs prior to the seven-year tribulation. The second stage occurs *after* the tribulation, when Christ returns with His saints to reign over the earth for a thousand years. Paul calls the rapture a "mystery" in 1 Corinthians 15. A mystery is an event hidden in God from the foundation of the world, but now known by revelation. The Lord first hinted at the rapture in John 14:3, when He promised His disciples, "I will come again and receive you unto Myself, that where I am, there ye may be also." Paul expounds the subject in 1 Thes 4:14-17, and mentions it briefly in other places (e.g. 2 Thes 2:1).

The Bible teaches six "raptures" or "translations." Four have already occurred, and two are still future. The word "rapture" comes from *raptō* (to seize and carry off), the Latin term for the verb *harpazo* (catch up; take away, carry off; take by force--the harpy eagle) in this verse. "Translation" is from *translatio* (transporting, transferring), because people are transported from one location to another. The four past raptures are those of Enoch (Gen 5:24; Heb 11:5), Elijah (2 Kings 2:1,11), Christ (Mark 16:19; Acts 1:9-11; Rev 12:5), and Paul (2 Cor 12:2-4). The same verb *harpazo* is used for the Lord's ascension (Rev 12:5), for Paul's (2 Cor 12:2-4), and for the church's (1 Thes 4:17). The last rapture will occur when the two witnesses of the Tribulation ascend to heaven after God has raised them from death (Rev 11:3,11-2).

The souls of dead church saints will descend from heaven with Christ at His coming (1 Thes 4:14). When these church saints died, their souls left their bodies and went to be with Christ in heaven (2 Cor 5:6-8; Phil 1:21-3). Paul writes to the Thessalonians to settle their fear that Christians who had died would miss out in the great events of the Lord's coming. Paul assures them that the dead not only will be present, but will actually accompany Christ and receive resurrection bodies before the living saints are caught up.

Christ will descend with a shout and the blast of a trumpet from the Father's house in heaven (John 14:3) to the air above the earth. The bodies of dead church saints will be raised as immortal, incorruptible bodies and will be reunited with their returning souls (1 Cor 15:42-4,52-3). The bodies of church saints who are still alive at the coming will be changed instantly into immortal, incorruptible bodies (1 Cor 15:51-3). Since Paul does not mention the bodily change of the living saints in this passage, we cannot be sure whether it occurs simultaneously with the resurrection

of the dead saints' bodies or afterward. Since the whole event occurs so suddenly, however, it really makes no difference.

Both the resurrected and changed church saints will be caught up together to meet Christ in the air (John 14:3). They will return with Christ to His Father's house, and never be parted from Him again (cf 1 Thes 5:10; John 14:3, "that where I am, there ye may be also"). "Caught up" is a verb of abrupt suddenness. It allows for no process stretched out over a long time period. Similarly, the change in the believers' bodies occurs "in a moment" (1 Cor 15:51-2).

IV. The Tribulation (the Seventieth Week of Daniel)

Tribulation means *extreme distress or suffering resulting from oppression*. The Bible calls this period "the time of Jacob's trouble" (Jer 30). After the Rapture, God again begins to deal with Israel as a nation. During this period, a man known as the Antichrist (1 John 2), possessed by Satan, will become world dictator and will bring the world as close to annihilation as it will ever come (Mat 24). It will be a time of unparalleled persecution of Jews and those who become believers during this period. Between nuclear holocausts (?) and direct judgments from God, those remaining on the earth will wish they were dead (Rev 9). Those who knew the gospel before the tribulation began will not have an opportunity to believe in the tribulation (1 Thes 2).

God revealed Israel's future to Daniel in about 530 BC. Seventy weeks of years (490 years) were allotted to the nation (9:24-27). The clock began in 444 BC with the decree of Artaxerxes, the Persian ruler, to restore and rebuild Jerusalem. From the giving of this decree to the time of Messiah would be 69 weeks of years, or 483 Biblical years. That is 173,880 days. This occurred exactly as predicted (Luke 19:29-44). After this, the clock stopped, and the 70th week would not begin until Messiah was "cut off" and the city of Jerusalem destroyed.

The Tribulation is the 70th week. It will begin with the signing of a treaty between Israel and the Antichrist (9:27). The Jews will resume their sacrifices at a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. After three and one-half years, however, the Antichrist will betray Israel and set up "the abomination of Desolation" (Mat 24:15; 2 Thes 2:3-4; Rev 13:14-15). This begins the true "tribulation," a time of unspeakable horror (Mat 24:15-22). Christ will return at the end to destroy the Antichrist and to save His people.

V. The Day of The Lord

The Day of the Lord is the period of time beginning with the return of the Lord in glory (Mat 24:29-30), and ending with the purgation of the heavens and earth by fire preparatory to the new heavens and the new earth (Is 65:17-19; 66:22; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1). At the beginning of this period, the Antichrist, the False Prophet, and the armies of the kings of the earth will be destroyed (Rev 19:11-21). Christ will judge both the Gentile nations (Zech 14:1-9; Mat 25:31-46) and the nation of Israel. The Millennium is part of the Day of the Lord (Rev 20:4-6), including the Satanic revolt at the end of this period (20:7-10). The Day of the Lord concludes with the second resurrection, the Great White Throne Judgment (Rev 20:11-15), and the purification of the universe by fire (2 Pet 3:10-13).

VI. The Day of God. The Eternal State. Rev 21:1-22:5.