



Basic Bible Course

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The Three Dispensations of God's Will to Man



Lesson Three

INTRODUCTION: “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork” (Psalm 19:1). Thus, to know God’s *glory*, and his *handywork*, let us study the heavens and the firmament. But one may study the stars until the day of His death and never know one thing about the *will* of God to mankind. To know God’s WILL, man must study His WORD.

A careful study of God’s Word, the Bible, shows it is divided into three dispensations of religion—Patriarchal, Jewish, and Christian. God revealed His will to men in each dispensation. However, God’s will in one dispensation (i.e. divinely appointed order or system) was not the same in succeeding dispensations. From God’s Word, let us note the basic differences:

I. THE PATRIARCHAL DISPENSATION.

(Genesis 1:1 to Exodus 20)

- A. For approximately the first 2,500 years of mankind (i.e. from Adam to Moses), God dealt with human beings as individuals and families.
 - 1. The head of each family, called the “patriarch,” was used as a sort of priest over his family.
- B. During this period, God commanded one thing of one person, another thing of another person; His commands from one person or family to the next were not necessarily the same.

EXAMPLES:

- 1. God commanded ADAM AND EVE, “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” (Genesis 2:17).
 - a. Adam and Eve ate of this tree—and we know the consequences (Genesis 3:1-24).
- 2. God commanded NOAH to build an ark (Genesis 6:14-16).
 - a. Up to this time, no rain is recorded to have fallen upon the earth (Genesis 2:5-6).
 - b. But God was grieved by the wickedness of man (Genesis 6:5-6).
 - c. God determined to destroy man from the face of the earth (Genesis 6:7).
 - d. But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord (Genesis 6:8).
 - e. God’s command to Noah to build an ark was based on His decision to destroy “all flesh, wherein is the breath of life,” by bringing a “flood of waters upon the earth” (Genesis 6:17).
 - f. Rain or no rain, Noah believed God, for, “according to all that God commanded him, so did he” (Genesis 6:22).
 - g. The result of Noah’s obedience is recorded in Genesis, Chapters 7 and 8.

QUESTION: Whom else did God ever command to build such an ark, other than Noah?
Answer: NOBODY ELSE.

3. God commanded ABRAHAM to offer his son Isaac on an altar as a burnt offering (Genesis 22:1-2).
 - a. The purpose of this command was to prove Abraham's faith (verses 1 and 12).
 - b. Abraham, by faith, proceeded to do exactly as God had commanded him, until God was satisfied of his faithfulness and stayed his hand (verses 3-14).
 - c. God blessed Abraham for his faithfulness (verses 15-18).

QUESTION: Whom else did God command to offer his son as a burnt offering? Answer: NOBODY ELSE.

NOTE: From the foregoing, we see that God's revealed will, during the time of the patriarchs from Adam to Moses, differed from one individual and/or family to another.

II. THE JEWISH DISPENSATION (Exodus 20 to Acts 2).

- A. Toward the end of the patriarchal period, Abraham's grandson, Jacob, wrestled with an angel one night "until the breaking of the day" (Genesis 32:24-32).
 1. This angel was unable to prevail against Jacob (verse 25).
 2. He touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh, and it went out of joint as they wrestled (verse 25).
 3. The angel said, "Let me go, for the day breaketh."
 4. Jacob said, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me" (verse 26).
 5. The angel said, "What *is* thy name?"
 6. And he said, "Jacob" (verse 27).
 7. The angel replied, "Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but ISRAEL: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed" (verse 28).
 8. The angel blessed him (verse 29).
- B. Hundreds of years before this, God had said unto Abraham (then called 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" (Genesis 12:1-3).
- C. By the end of their sojourn in the land of Egypt, several centuries later, Abraham's descendants, now known as the "children of Israel" had, indeed, become "A GREAT NATION."
 1. The children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty: and the land was filled with them (Exodus 1:7).
 2. The Egyptians had become jealous of the children of Israel (i.e., the Jews) and subjected them to bondage and slavery (Exodus 1:8-14).
 3. God raised up a mighty leader among the children of Israel, named Moses.
 4. After much fruitless contention with the Egyptians, Moses finally led the children of Israel out of bondage into the wilderness of Zin, which was across the Red Sea from Egypt (Exodus 14).
 5. In the third month, when the children of Israel were gone forth out of the land of Egypt, they came into the wilderness of Sinai (Exodus 19:1).
 - a. In that wilderness, they camped before a certain mountain (verse 2).
 - b. God called Moses up into the mountain to talk (verse 3).
 - c. God told Moses that *if the children of Israel would obey His voice and keep His covenant*, then He should make them a *peculiar treasure* unto Himself ABOVE ALL PEOPLE (verse 5).
- D. Having chosen the children of Israel to be His "people," God gave them a special "law" at Mount Sinai (Exodus 20).
 1. This law was unknown to their fathers (Deuteronomy 5:3).

2. This law (which included *the Ten Commandments*) was made with Israel, i.e., those “brought... out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Exodus 20:2).
 3. This law was binding *only* upon Israel (Deuteronomy 5:104).
 4. It was *not* binding upon the *Gentiles* (Romans 2:14).
- E. Thus, for the next approximately 1,500 years, God *no longer* dealt with individuals and families, but with the children of Israel, AS A NATION.

NOTE: This “law,” known variously as “the covenant,” “the law of the Lord,” or “the law of Moses,” thus became a middle wall of partition between Jews and Gentiles. National Israel had the law; Gentile nations had not the law. This arrangement continued from Moses on Sinai to Christ on Pentecost.

III. THE CHRISTIAN DISPENSATION.

- A. Jesus Christ was born under the law of Moses (Galatians 4:4).
- B. Jesus did not come to “destroy” the law, but to “fulfill” it (Matthew 5:17-18).
 1. He taught that the law could not pass UNTIL ALL BE FULFILLED (verse 18).
 2. His purpose in coming was to FULFILL the law (verse 17).
 3. Jesus FINISHED the work He came to do (John 17:4).
 4. Hence we see the law passing, *not* by being *destroyed* but by being *fulfilled*.

NOTE: Some Bible students stumble at this point, not discerning how Jesus could cause the law to pass by fulfillment rather than by destruction. We might illustrate this principle by a contract. Let us say that a builder has a contract with a certain city to build a bridge. There are two possible dispositions he can make of this contract. Either he can *destroy* the contract or he can *fulfill* it. If he *destroys* it, the contract is certainly GONE. But, if he FULFILLS it, the contract's NO LESS GONE THAN AS IF HE HAD DESTROYED IT. The difference is not whether the contract is still in force or not, but *how did it pass—by destruction or by fulfillment?* Even so the law to Israel passed, not by destruction, but by Jesus Christ living up to it perfectly. He thus became the fulfillment of the law. When He was nailed to His cross, the OLD law was nailed there with Him, thus opening the way for a NEW law to be established.

- C. All the while Jesus was fulfilling the terms of the OLD law—the law under which He was born—He was announcing the principles and terms of a NEW law, which was to be of force later on.
 1. This NEW law (or testament) could not come into force, while Jesus was first alive upon the earth (Hebrews 9:15-17).
- D. Also the SECOND law could not be established, while the FIRST law remained (Hebrews 10:9).
 1. It was necessary, therefore, that the OLD testament (or law), which came by Moses, be nailed to the cross (figuratively speaking, of course), thus clearing the way for the New Testament to come into force.

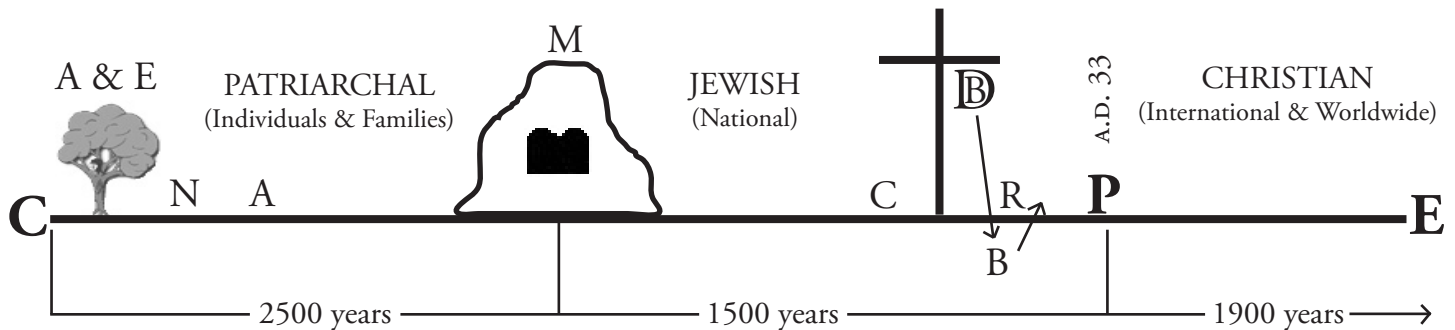
NOTE: In our very next lesson, we shall go into this matter exhaustively. It will not do for Christians to think that ANY PART of the OLD law was carried over into the NEW. It was not. Every last “jot” or “tittle” was abrogated at Calvary.

- E. Jesus sent His Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), thus empowering the apostles to preach the gospel according to the NEW testament, which came into force that same day.
- F. The NEW Testament, from that day forward, WHOLLY SUPPLANTED the OLD Testament (Hebrews 10:9).
 1. The Jews, who formerly kept the OLD Testament, now were obliged to give it up and accept the NEW Testament.
 2. Gentiles, who were EXCLUDED under the OLD Testament, were INCLUDED under the NEW Testament.
- G. The New Testament, thus, became the basis of INTERNATIONAL, or WORLD-WIDE religion (Luke 24:46-47; Mark 16:15-16).

H. Beginning on Pentecost (A.D. 33), as set forth in Acts 2, it is to remain in force until the end of time (Matthew 28:20).

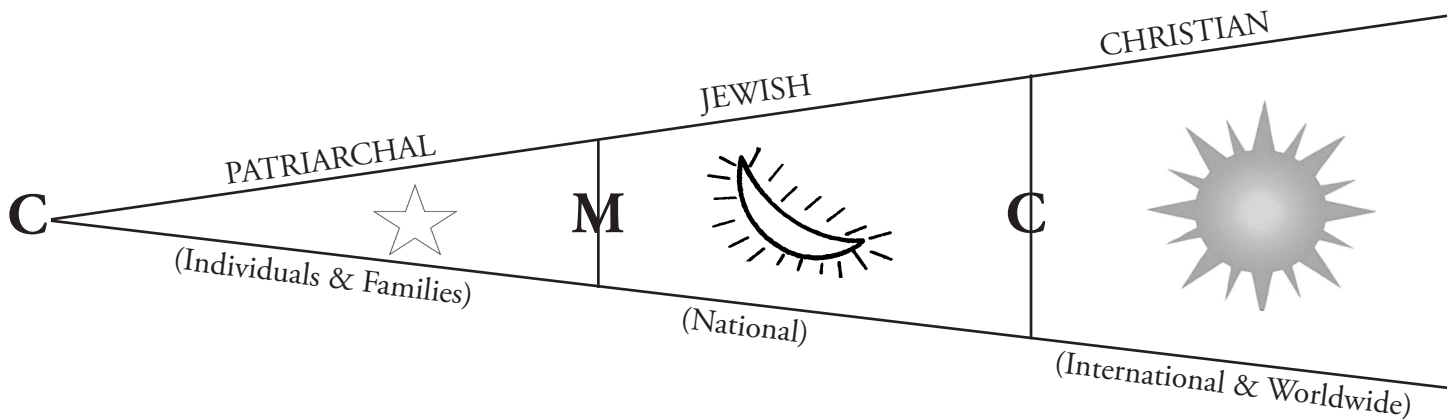
NOTE: Following are two charts to illustrate the three dispensations:

Chart A—



EXPLANATION: The center line from C to E represents the PASSAGE OF TIME from CREATION to the END of the world. The tree with A & E (left) is the GARDEN OF EDEN, where ADAM & EVE were placed. The mountain with M on top is MOSES on MOUNT SINAI, receiving the LAW. The next C stands for the COMING OF CHRIST; the cross, His CRUCIFIXION; the B inside the D is the BLOOD He shed in His DEATH. The B below is His BURIAL; R is His RESURRECTION from the dead the third day; and P is for PENTECOST 50 days later. From Adam and Eve to Moses on Sinai, a PATRIARCHAL type of religion reigned, based on the FAMILY, lasting 2,500 years. From Moses to Christ on Pentecost (A.D. 33), the patriarchal system gave way to the JEWISH religion, based on the children of Israel as a NATION, lasting for 1,500 years. From Christ on Pentecost to the End of time, the CHRISTIAN religion supplants the Jewish, is INTERNATIONAL in character, world-wide in extent, has already lasted 1,900 years and must continue to the end of the world. A similar explanation also is applicable to Chart B, as follows:

Chart B—



NOTE: Although Chart B is largely self-explanatory, let us consider one or two extra thoughts. We have used a STAR in the patriarchal section to denote the tiny bit of “light” God gave to mankind as INDIVIDUALS and FAMILIES during that period...By the time we come to Moses on Sinai, the light of God’s will was greatly increased, as religion was enlarged from family worship to NATIONAL worship—hence we have used the MOON to illustrate this idea...But the starlight of the patriarchs and the moonlight of the Jewish nation (i.e., the Old Testament) could in no wise compare with the sunlight of the CHRISTIAN religion (i.e., the New Testament), whereby Jesus Christ shed His saving grace abroad to ALL MEN EVERYWHERE. Thus we have used the SUN to illustrate the worldwide enlightenment of the CHRISTIAN AGE.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS LESSON to a clear understanding of the Bible cannot be over-emphasized. So many fail to comprehend the Scriptures through failure to recognize they cover THREE DISTINCT and SEPARATE DISPENSATIONS OF RELIGION. God HIMSELF never changes; however, He certainly HAS changed His WILL toward man in DIFFERENT DISPENSATIONS (All the more reason His WORD must be RIGHTLY DIVIDED!).

It is at once apparent to every thoughtful student that the individual commands God gave to individuals and/or families in the FIRST dispensation ended with the ones to whom the commands were given. For example, when Adam and Eve died, no one else having been forbidden to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the command died with them. No one else having been commanded to build an ark, this command died with Noah. No one else having been commanded to offer his son as a burnt offering, this command died with Abraham. So also for the other individual commands of the patriarchal dispensation.

But what of the law God gave through Moses on Sinai: Because that law contained the TEN COMMANDMENTS, a great effort is made by some to show that though the law as a whole died, yet the ten commandments continue. Otherwise, we are asked, where is your MORAL LAW?

In our NEXT lesson—Lesson 4—we shall show conclusively that NO PART OF THE LAW to Israel continues over into the New Testament, or Christian dispensation A that EVERY BIT OF IT was, in a figure, “NAILED TO THE CROSS.” As long as any of that law continued, the new testament could not come into force. But we'll save that discussion until NEXT time...For now, please study through the things set forth in Lesson 3; then answer the questions for correction and grading.