

Understanding the Bible as a Whole

Dispensations are the Key





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GBV Dillenburg GmbH

Eiershäuser Straße 54

35713 Eschenburg

GERMANY

www.gbv-dillenburg.de

www.gbv-online.org

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1. THE MAIN POINT: THE CONNECTING THREAD

How can we understand the overall message of the Bible?
How do the historical and prophetic books, the gospels, and
the epistles fit together?

There is indeed a connecting thread that runs through the Bible.
And there's a simple method to discover it:

***We have to realize that there are
different dispensations¹ in the Bible!***

¹ In the New King James translation, the word "dispensation" appears in Ephesians 1:10 and 3:2. In both instances, the Greek word translated here as "dispensation" means "household management". Broadly speaking, a dispensation can be described as the administration or order that God wishes to establish at any given time. Recognising that the Bible tells the "story" of God's ways through different "dispensations" to fulfill His plan with mankind, enables us to understand the Bible as a whole, as a coherent revelation of God.

2. INTRODUCTION

Pork, the Accident, and the Sabbath

THE BBQ

A young believer – let's call him Tim – is invited to a barbecue. Just as things are about to kick off, someone comments, "By the way, this is all pork." The young Christian is unsure how to react. Do Christians eat pork? Does the Bible say anything about it?

Reaching for his phone, Tim tries to gain some clarity. A quick search for "swine" and "meat" promptly leads him to Deuteronomy 14:

**"Also the swine is unclean for you, ... you shall not eat their flesh."
(Deuteronomy 14:8)**

Somewhat disappointed, Tim is about to say his goodbyes when a thought strikes him: Perhaps the Bible says more on this topic. Upon a second search, he finds the following result:

"Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience' sake." (1 Corinthians 10:25)

At first, he breathes a sigh of relief. So it's okay after all; he can stay. But in the next moment, he realizes he now has a dilemma: The

two Bible verses seem to contradict each other. Which verse applies to him? Who determines this? On what criteria should he base his decision? By what authority could he decide whether Deuteronomy 14 (do not eat) or rather 1 Corinthians 10 (eat, without questioning) applies to him?

Tim decides to follow 1 Corinthians 10 because it was written later and belongs to the New Testament. But he doesn't feel entirely comfortable with that decision. Isn't the Old Testament also the Word of God? Doesn't it say, referring specifically to the Old Testament, "all scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Tim 3:16)?

Tim realizes he's missing something important. He urgently needs a framework to resolve this apparent contradiction. He wants to respect both Bible verses, but also to be sure about whether he can eat pork or not.

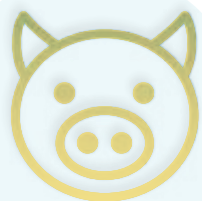
What he doesn't know yet is that this framework already exists: dispensational understanding!

THERE'S BEEN A CRASH

The BBQ is over. Well-fed but still deep in thought, Tim sets off for home. But then disaster strikes. A car ignores a stop sign, Tim can't swerve in time, and there's a crash! Fortunately, no one is hurt – but the cars are total wrecks.

Together with his two children, the driver of the other vehicle, a middle-aged man, climbs out. Tim – still shaken to the core – ponders:

4



Does the Bible
contradict itself
here?



How should he react now? After all, he's a committed Christian. But he's definitely upset. He slowly approaches the person responsible for the accident. As he does, a verse comes to mind, the one he read during his devotion that morning:

“Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow. Let his children continually be vagabonds, and beg; let them seek their bread also from their desolate places.”
(Psalm 109:9-10)

And what about this?

David probably had good reasons for making that statement, but instinctively Tim feels that such thoughts of revenge are unchristian. Fortunately, another verse comes to his mind:

“But love your enemies, do good ... and your reward will be great.”
(Luke 6:35)

Tim gathers himself. He extends his hand to the stranger and asks if everyone is OK. Somehow, he feels relieved, but once again he's nagged by the uneasy feeling that he somehow arbitrarily disregarded one verse and followed another. On what authority?

THE RIDE-ON LAWN MOWER

Finally, Tim makes it home and, exhausted, collapses into bed, planning to sleep in well into Saturday morning. But promptly at eight, he's awakened by a loud engine. His neighbor has just purchased a ride-on lawn mower and is testing it out – seemingly with growing enthusiasm – not far from Tim's bedroom window. Groggily, Tim contemplates how he should feel about this. He recalls that in the Bible, Saturday is called the Sabbath and that there were specific reg-

ulations about it. Bleary-eyed, he types the word “Sabbath” into his smartphone and immediately finds:

Who still adheres to that?

“Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh day shall be a holy day for you, a Sabbath of rest to the Lord.
Whoever does any work on it shall be put to death.”
(Exodus 35:2)

Now Tim is wide awake. Especially the latter part of the verse has caught his attention. Is his neighbor currently committing an offense that should be (or should have been) punishable by death? If so, who would be responsible for enforcing this? Why isn't anyone doing anything about it? Fortunately, Tim doesn't take any action – except for firmly resolving to find out how to correctly understand the Bible and how to meaningfully interpret such verses.

Admittedly, these examples are fictional – but the issue is real and sometimes even controversial.

Between Confusion and Arbitrariness – à la carte Christianity?

The fictional experiences of Tim demonstrate that the Bible contains statements and directives that seem contradictory, as well as instructions that Christians generally don't adhere to.

But how can this be? If the Bible is the Word of God, it is more than presumptuous to arbitrarily decide which parts of the Bible “apply” and which do not. By doing so, we are placing ourselves above God.



If the Bible is the Word of God, then it must hold the key to resolving these (apparent) contradictions and to clarifying which parts of God's Word apply directly to Christians.

Thankfully, such a key exists! God has embedded it within His Word. This key is *dispensational understanding* (recognizing the different eras - or "dispensations" - of the Bible). One uses it by taking the statements of the Bible seriously but interpreting and understanding them in their context.

Those who neglect this key read the Bible as if every statement applies directly to them. As the examples show, they will encounter significant difficulties. Two possible reactions remain:

- › They are confused because they come across contradictory statements, or
- › They use the Bible like a menu, simply selecting verses that they find plausible, practicable, or acceptable for our times, and therefore consider binding for themselves – essentially, a kind of "à la carte Christianity."

The former is confusion; the latter is arbitrariness. Often, both go hand in hand. One tries to escape the confusion by (arbitrarily) determining what applies and what doesn't. It's no wonder that many Bible readers develop very different convictions.



Further Examples: Apparent Contradictions

Those who don't contextualize Bible passages within the scope of dispensations will encounter many more apparent contradictions. However, once viewed through the lens of dispensations, most of these fade away. Some examples of apparent contradictions are:

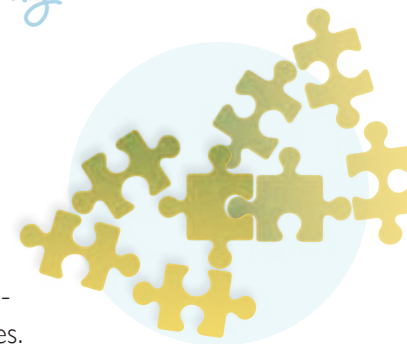
1. When reading Matthew 5, one gets the strong impression that Jesus Christ taught something that not only went beyond the Old Testament but seemed to contradict it: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also" (Matthew 5:38-39). How is this possible?
2. The jailer in Philippi was told he needed to believe in the Lord Jesus to be saved (Acts 16:31). Prior to his time, many generations of people lived who didn't know this message (because Christ had not yet come). Was there suddenly a new way to salvation?
3. Paul says that the Spirit of God dwells in us and with Him we are sealed (and the Lord confirms that the Spirit will stay with and in us forever), but David asks the Lord not to take His Spirit from him (Psalm 51:11).
4. The Israelites were forbidden, at the risk of their death, to break the Sabbath. Paul says the Sabbath is a shadow, meaning it doesn't need to be kept (Colossians 2:16-17).
5. God had ordained that certain annual feasts should be celebrated (Exodus 34:22-23). The Colossians are told not to let anyone judge them "regarding a festival" (Colossians 2:16).

6. In the Old Testament, God gives very specific instructions on which animal sacrifices should be offered for worship and how they should be sacrificed. Peter explains that we offer “spiritual sacrifices” (1 Peter 2:5).
7. In the Old Testament, there was a class of priests. Only the sons of Aaron (or later their sons) could be priests. Peter and John tell us that all believers are priests (Exodus 28:1; 1 Peter 2:5; Revelation 1:6).
8. The Bible says that some believers are blessed “from” the foundation of the world (Matthew 25:34), while other believers are blessed even “before” the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:3-4). Why this distinction?
9. The Psalms frequently speak of the hope for a long life on earth. In contrast, the New Testament continually emphasizes the heavenly hope of believers, indicating that it may be realized at any moment (something the Psalms never do).
10. Certain especially precious revelations were kept secret by God for centuries (like the “mystery of Christ” for instance). It was only through the Apostle Paul that He made it known (Ephesians 3:4-5).

How are all these differences to be understood and the apparent contradictions resolved? Indeed, without recognizing the presence of different dispensations in the history of God’s dealings with mankind, this is actually impossible. However, by recognizing them, these matters can be easily categorized. Suddenly, one not only recognizes these differences and contrasts but also understands their deeper meaning. One realizes that the Bible forms a harmonious whole and that everything is right in its place.

The distinction between dispensations is established by the Bible itself. Let’s explore this point together – it’s worth the effort!

Discovering the Connecting Thread – But How?



Many Bible readers are familiar with a host of biblical stories and the books of the Bible but are not quite sure how they fit together. They read the accounts of Abraham, David and Ruth. They rejoice in the faith of such individuals and learn lessons from their mistakes. They savor the promises of certain Psalms – but what is the overall message of the Bible? How can we understand its history, prophets, gospels, and epistles in context?

There truly is a *connecting thread* that runs through the Bible. And there is a simple method to discover it: We need to recognize that there are different dispensations in the Bible. God does not act the same way at all times and with all people. From time to time, He changes the “rules of the game.”

Dispensational Understanding

The Bible tells the “story” of the way God has acted and will act through the centuries and different dispensations to fulfill His plan with mankind. Those who take this into account, those who think in a dispensational manner, can understand the Bible as a whole, as a coherent revelation of God.

Those who ignore the differences between dispensations can benefit from individual verses of the Bible but will not be able to understand the Bible as a whole.

Understanding Bible Verses



To truly grasp Bible verses, we need to place them in the right “drawer,” meaning we must categorize them and understand which dispensation they pertain to. At first glance, this might seem a bit daunting. Yet in our daily lives, we’re accustomed to constantly categorizing information. We frequently ask questions like: “Which game do these rules apply to?” “In which country does this law apply?” “Does this tax rule apply to us?” And so on.

Similarly, when reading the Bible, we should ask who is speaking or writing, to whom, for what reason, and (especially important) to which dispensation the statement refers.

Of course, God’s Word is alive. Undoubtedly, the Lord can make an individual Bible verse speak to us. But those who want to understand the message of the Bible must read each statement in its context.

Guarding Against Error



Unfortunately, there are many false teachings today. What’s perplexing is that they are often supported using Bible verses. We could get the impression that anything can be proved from the Bible. How can this be? Simply because Bible verses are taken out of context. Very

often, the dispensational context is overlooked. But those who place the Bible verses in their proper context and take into account the dispensational eras they refer to can more easily discern the truth and ward off error.

More Than Just Time Periods

However, it’s about more than just time periods. These are a means to an end. The importance isn’t on the periods or their number, their names, or their respective durations. The crucial aspect is to understand precisely how God acts in each dispensation, which rules He sets for each time period, and how believers relate to Him depending on the dispensation they are in.

Central to this is the Christian time period. There are significant differences between this Christian dispensation, in which we live, and other dispensations.

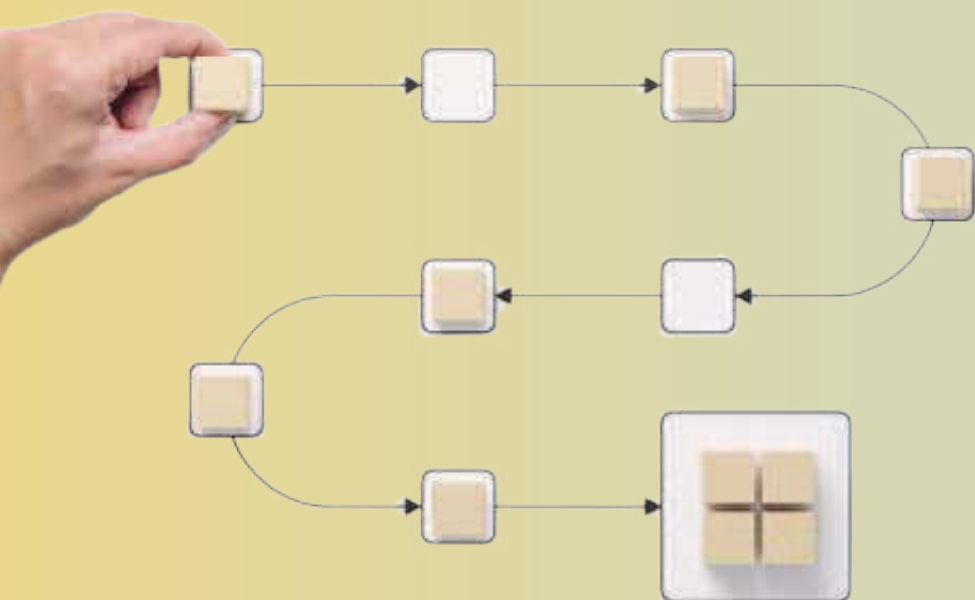
In order to develop this theme, we will examine ten *building blocks* or *foundational pillars* of biblical truth (Chapter 5, p. 45ff).

These *foundational pillars* are related to the core of Christianity and the differences between *Christians* on the one hand and believers in other ages on the other. Understanding these differences is much more important than the precise categorization of the dispensations themselves.



QUESTIONS:

1. What questions should we always ask when reading a Bible passage?
2. If you do not distinguish dispensations, you will inevitably have to conclude that different Bible verses contradict each other (which, of course, is not the case). Please provide three examples.
3. Which dispensation do we live in?



Dispensations and Practice

Dispensational periods are not just for “hobby theologians,” but we have to know them in order to read the Bible with understanding. They also help to answer very important questions:

- › “What is a Christian?”
- › “How do Christians differ from believers in other time periods?”
- › “What is God’s will in my daily life?”
- › “What goals do we pursue as Christians?”

The following pages demonstrate that dispensational understanding is extremely practical. We need the connecting thread to recognize God's will.

3. WHAT DISPENSATIONS ARE THERE?

As we've seen, to properly understand Bible verses, we need to place them into the correct dispensation. But what dispensations are there (and who decides)?

Who Decides on the Dispensations?

The Bible explains itself. There's no need to impose any conceptual frameworks (or dispensations) onto it. It shows for itself that there have been clear demarcations where God has set the relationship of human beings to Himself on a "new footing."

Just think about the giving of the law at Sinai or the incarnation of Christ. These events fundamentally changed the relationship between God and mankind.

How Do We Know When a New Dispensation Begins?

When a new dispensation begins, it is God Himself who gives the "starting signal," through a direct communication to the people He is engaging with in that dispensation. He explains to them their new relationship with Him and the *changes* in behavior and *responsibility* towards God that this new dispensation entails.

A dispensation can be identified and distinguished from other dispensations by the following characteristics:

1. **A New Revelation from God:** At the beginning of a dispensation, God gives a new revelation. This doesn't mean that He has changed, but rather that He is revealing an additional aspect of Himself or establishing new foundational rules by which people should act.
2. **Resulting Human Responsibility:** From this new revelation emerges a responsibility that people are expected to fulfill.
3. **Early Failure:** Generally, it becomes apparent that people fail almost immediately, at the beginning of the newly introduced dispensation.
4. **Termination with Judgment:** This failure leads to the dispensation ending with God's judgment.

These points are found across biblical dispensations. The first two are the **actual hallmarks**. When these are present, a new dispensation begins. Points 3 and 4 are more like **observations** (i.e. features that typically accompany a dispensation).

Discovering Dispensations Isn't Hard

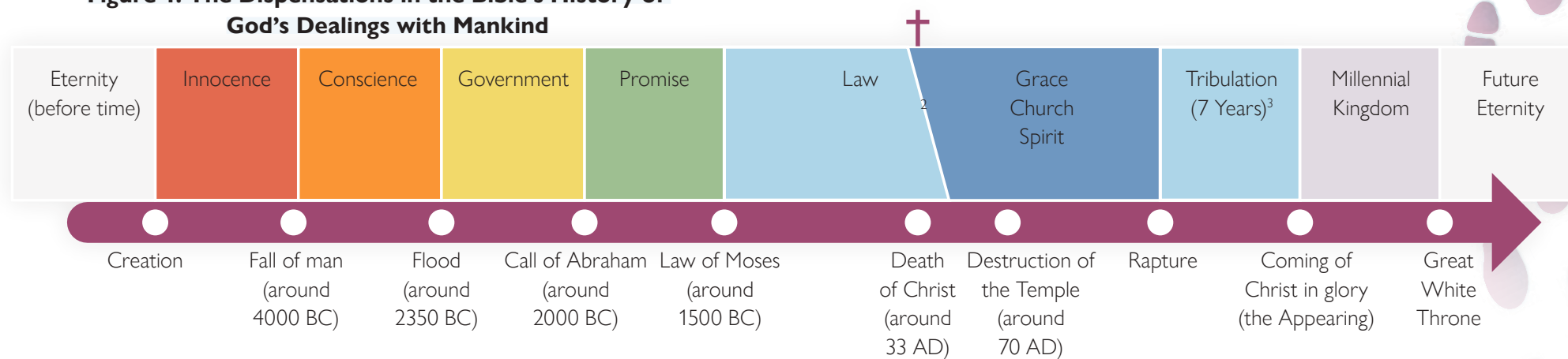
Even someone who's picking up the Bible for the first time will quickly realize that there are distinct periods in which God's ways with mankind differ. Just a glance at the table of contents reveals that the Bible is split into two main parts: the Old and New Testaments. Clearly, there must be an event so significant that God decided to divide His book into two sections.

The very first verse of the New Testament clarifies what this event was:

"The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham." (Matthew 1:1)



Figure 1: The Dispensations in the Bible's History of God's Dealings with Mankind



With the arrival of Jesus Christ – about 2,000 years ago – a new “chapter” in the history of God’s dealings with mankind began. So, there are at least two different dispensations in human history: the time before and the time after Christ’s coming.

Reading the Old Testament, we find other significant dividing lines. They’re not hard to spot:

- › When God expelled Adam and Eve from Paradise, the rules were no longer the same.
- › When God gave Noah the authority to govern (the command to punish evil; see Genesis 9), the “rules of the game” changed again.
- › And when God gave the law through Moses at Sinai, completely new rules applied to the people of Israel.

As these simple examples show, dispensations are not determined by humans, but by God Himself. The Bible itself makes it clear that God interacts differently with people in different dispensations (the reason for this we’ll soon find out – keep reading!).

What Dispensations Are There?

Now we come to the specific dispensations. The important thing here isn’t the exact number of dispensations (sometimes two dispensations can be combined into one). It’s about recognizing certain key dividing lines that you can’t afford to overlook. The most crucial among these is the coming of the Son of God (His incarnation and atoning death), marking the transition from the Old to the New Testament. One of the most important insights, then, lies in distinguishing the *Christian* dispensation¹ from those before and after it.

A HANDY DIVISION INTO SEVEN DISPENSATIONS

It’s useful to distinguish seven dispensations or time periods in the Bible.

Each of these dispensations can be identified by the four characteristics previously mentioned. The table on the next page summarizes this.

¹ See Chapter 6, p. 85ff.

² The transition between the law and Grace dispensations is a transitional period and cannot be pinned down to a specific date.

³ Color Explanation: The Tribulation does not have to be counted as a separate dispensation but can be seen as a continuation of the law period: details in Chapter 5, *Building Block* 9, p. 75.

Table 1: The Dispensations

	Time	Dispensation	Revelation from God	Responsibility	Failure from the Start	Ends with Judgment
1	From the Creation of mankind to the Fall	Innocence (Genesis 2:15-17)	Command not to eat from the tree in the middle of the garden	Heed God's command	The Fall into sin (Genesis 3:6)	Expelled from Eden (Genesis 3:22-24)
2	From the Fall to the Flood	Conscience (Genesis 3:7, 22)	Fallen man acquires a conscience	Do good and not evil, which the conscience warns against	Fratricide by Cain (Genesis 4:8)	The Flood (Genesis 6:5, 11-14; 7:11-12, 20-24)
3	From the Flood to the Tower of Babel	Government (Genesis 9:1-2, 6)	Noah was to punish evil	Be God's representative as government on earth	Noah becomes drunk and exposes himself (Genesis 9:20-24)	Confusion of languages (Genesis 11:1-9)
4	From the Call of Abraham to Sinai	Promise (Genesis 12:1-3)	God calls Abraham	Leave family and dwell in the land	Abraham leaves the land and goes to Egypt (Genesis 12:10-20)	Abraham's descendants in bondage in Egypt (Exodus 1)
5	From the law of Moses to Christ	Law (Exodus 19:1-8; Exodus 20)	God gives Israel the law from Mount Sinai	Keep the law	<i>At the beginning</i> (Exodus 32) <i>throughout</i> (2 Kings 17:7-12) <i>and finally</i> (Acts 2:22-23; 7:51-53)	Captivity in Assyria and Babylon (2 Kings 17 and 25) destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 21:6, 20-24)
6	The Christian Dispensation: from Pentecost to the Rapture	Grace/Church/Spirit (Acts 2:1)	God reveals Himself in Christ. The Spirit of God comes to dwell in redeemed believers on earth. (Hebrews 1:1; John 16:13; 2 Timothy 1:14)	Live worthy of the Christian calling (Ephesians 4:1)	Hypocrisy and grumbling (Acts 5 and 6) false teaching (Acts 20:30; 1 John 2:18-19, 22)	Judgment on false Christianity at the Appearing (2 Thessalonians 2:7-12; Revelation 3:16; Revelation 17 and 19)
7	1,000 Years: from the Appearing of Christ in glory to the end of His Reign: the "Millennial Kingdom"	Millennial Kingdom (Isaiah 11; Ephesians 1:10; Revelation 20)	Christ appears and establishes His Kingdom (Revelation 19:11-21; Revelation 20)	Submit to the Reign of Christ	Sin during Christ's perfect Reign (Psalm 101:8; Revelation 20:7-9)	Judgment of rebellious nations and the Great White Throne (Revelation 20:7-15)

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The Dispensations in Detail

When looking at these seven dispensations, we can quickly recognize the four characteristics again. The two most important characteristics are that each dispensation begins with a revelation from God, and that this revelation brings about new human responsibilities.

1. INNOCENCE

After God created Adam and Eve, He set the rules by which they were to live. They were to tend the garden, and they could enjoy everything with one exception: They were not allowed to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:15-17). Thus, there was a *revelation* from God (He is the Creator) and a resulting *responsibility*.

We don't know exactly how long this period lasted, but it is noteworthy that immediately after the creation of mankind, we read about Adam and Eve breaking the commandment (Genesis 3). God expelled them from the Garden of Eden and announced severe consequences for them and for all creation. Death entered into the world. Hence, the other two characteristics were also met: early human *failure* and termination of the dispensation by God's *judgment*.

Revelation from God
+ new human responsibility
= new dispensation

2. CONSCIENCE

After Adam and Eve sinned, they realized they were naked (which illustrates the fact that sinners cannot appear before God). They had lost their innocence.

Again, God spoke to them. He laid out the bitter consequences: Through their sin, a curse had come into the world. In His grace, He clothed Adam and Eve, thereby foreshadowing acceptance into His favor through the death of a substitute and even hinting at a coming Savior (Genesis 3:15).

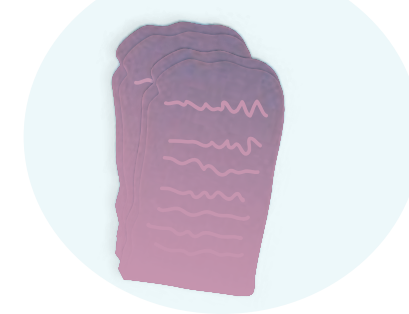
Furthermore, God gave Adam and Eve the knowledge of good and evil: the *conscience* (Genesis 3:22). They now knew something that was previously unknown to them. In this sense, they had received a "revelation," from which a responsibility emerged: They were not to act against their conscience.

The other two characteristics are also easy to recognize: early *failure* (the first murder was not long in coming, despite the fact that human beings possessed a conscience) and the termination of the dispensation by *judgment* (the Flood).

3. GOVERNMENT

After the Flood – which nearly wiped out all of mankind – God gave Noah the task of punishing evil. Specifically, He allowed animals to be killed but He strictly prohibited the shedding of human blood (i.e., taking human life by violence).





Anyone who killed a person was to be killed themselves (Genesis 9:6). Such an order had never existed before: a *government* instituted by God intended to maintain order by punishing acts of violence.

But even in this dispensation, human *failure* was quickly manifested. Noah, who was given the authority to govern, couldn't even govern himself (Genesis 9:20-24). The time period characterized by *government* ends with the Tower of Babel and God's *judgment* through the confusion of languages (Genesis 11).

4. PROMISE/CALLING

Immediately after (Genesis 12), we find another new beginning. God does something He had never done before (in human history – now about 2,000 years): He *calls* Abraham out of his surroundings and gives him wonderful *promises*. God even associated this new promise with a new name. He *revealed* Himself to Abraham as “the *Almighty*.”

This brought about a *responsibility*. God asked Abraham to leave his family and his city in Chaldea and to dwell in the land of Canaan.

Failure was not long in coming. Abraham left his home (Ur in Chaldea) but took part of his family with him and initially only got as far as Haran. Only after his father died did he move on to the land of Canaan. Unfortunately, he didn't stay there but moved to Egypt for a time, bringing disaster instead of blessing (Genesis 12). His descendants, the sons of Jacob, sold their brother into Egypt.

This dispensation also ends with *judgment* from God: Abraham's descendants are enslaved in Egypt¹.

¹ The calling of Abraham was not revoked and the promise granted to Him was not annulled; but God added to it through further revelation, such as the giving of the law of Sinai to His people Israel and, later, sending the Spirit to form the church, based on the accomplished work of Christ on the cross.

5. LAW

God makes another fresh start. He frees Abraham's descendants from Egypt and gives them the *law* from Sinai. This was also absolutely new: For the first time in human history, God detailed the requirements for human relationships and worship. In the Garden of Eden, there had been one command; now, there were over 600 commandments that had to be strictly followed.

But here too, the people to whom He gave the law *failed*. One of the most important commandments was to honor God alone and not to worship false gods. But that is exactly what the people of Israel did under Aaron's leadership. By worshiping the golden calf, they broke the law – even before they had the stone tablets in their hands.

This dispensation is central in God's dealings and covers almost the entire Old Testament, from Exodus 19 to Malachi. (The book of Job is an exception.)

This dispensation also ended with *judgment*:

- › First, 10 tribes were deported to Assyria (722 BC).
- › Then the remaining two tribes were taken into captivity in Babylon (starting in 606 BC), which lasted for 70 years. From that time on, God could no longer call the people of Israel *His people* – they became *Lo-Ammi* (not my people; compare Hosea 1:9).
- › Finally, after the Jews had rejected and crucified their own Messiah, in AD 70 the Romans came, destroyed the Temple, and drove them out of the land.



With this, the actual testing of mankind is concluded. It lasted about 4,000 years. God tested mankind under a variety of conditions and with great patience. Time and again, the result was the same:

complete failure.

Nonetheless, it's useful to distinguish two more dispensations. These two are also introduced by significant events.

6. THE CHRISTIAN DISPENSATION

In "the fullness of the time" (Galatians 4:4), Jesus Christ was born. His coming marks the most profound dispensational change there has ever been. At the end of His miraculous life of about 30 years, He died on the cross at Golgotha. Three days later, God raised Him from the dead.



These events lay the foundation for the new dispensation that was to come.

Shortly after Christ had risen and ascended to heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit to earth to baptize believers from all nations into one body (Acts 1:5; 1 Corinthians 12:13). This would have been completely impossible in the dispensation of the law, for the law mandated a strict separation of Israel from other nations. The creation of the *church*¹ by the Spirit of God at Pentecost was perhaps the most significant dividing line in history.

¹ The Greek word *ekklesia* can be translated as church, assembly, or congregation. Literally, it means "called out". The word was used for any gathering of people (e.g. for a city assembly, see Acts 19:32, 39). However, in the New Testament, it normally refers to the church of God (1. Timothy 3:15). It consists of all true believers. It is the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13). It was formed on Pentecost (Acts 2:1). From this point we will refer to it as the church. More on this in Chapter 5, *Building Block 3*, p. 52.

In the Christian dispensation¹, man as such is no longer being tested, but men are nevertheless under *responsibility*². Here too, early *failure* becomes visible (first in individual cases like in Acts 5 and 6, and later across the board – see 2 Timothy 2–4).

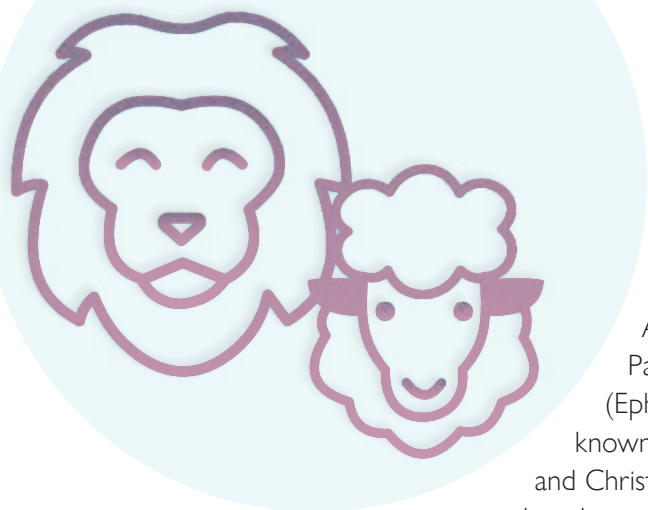
Another special feature of the Christian dispensation lies in its terminus. Believers will be taken out of the world by grace at Christ's return,¹ before He judges the world. But *nominal Christianity* will be characterized by indifference. Christ will "vomit" it out of His mouth (Revelation 3:16), that is, He will judge this system, this false bride (Revelation 17 and 18). In this way, *judgment* stands at the end here as well – at least for those whose Christianity was a mere nominal profession.

¹ Whether you view the Christian time period as a distinct dispensation or as an interlude (because the church no longer belongs to the world but is the called-out assembly (*ekklesia*)), in both cases it's clear: The Christian era is distinctly different from other dispensations.

² See Chapter 5, *Building Block 6*, p. 65.

¹ See Chapter 5, *Building Block 8*, p. 71.





7. THE MILLENNIAL KINGDOM

An important dispensation is yet to come. Paul refers to it as the “fullness of the times” (Ephesians 1:10). In this dispensation, also known as the Millennium, Satan will be bound, and Christ will Reign for 1,000 years (Revelation 20) so that there will be peace and righteousness on earth. The curse that rests upon creation will be removed. Even the wolf and the lamb will live together in peace, and the lion will eat straw (Isaiah 11:6; 65:25).

This dispensation is unlike any that have come before. In all other periods, Satan was not bound but active – with considerable success. And never before has Christ “taken the reins” to govern on earth. But that is exactly what will happen in this future time period, the thousand-year Kingdom of peace when Christ rules over creation. Large parts of the Old Testament’s prophetic books address this¹.

ETERNITY

After the Millennium, the material universe as we know it will pass away, and God will create a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1). Then, He will bring everything into



¹ More on this in Chapter 5, *Building Blocks* 4 and 10, p. 56 and 77.

a state where it can remain forever – in eternal harmony and glory, without curse and suffering. There will be only joy and happiness – except for those who are in eternal damnation.

Of course, the transition into eternity is a drastic change. It will be so momentous that the present universe will then come to an end. However, eternity cannot be counted as a *dispensation of the history of God’s dealings with mankind*, because there is no new responsibility. There will be no more sin.

The important thing is to *distinguish* eternity and not confuse it with the dispensations that have occurred through man’s history on this earth.

But why all these dispensations?

First and foremost, it’s essential to acknowledge that God is sovereign. He is free to act according to His will, and no human has the right to criticize divine action (compare Romans 9:20-21; Isaiah 10:15). Nevertheless, we can humbly attempt to understand God’s reasons for His actions. Those who do so will find that God has acted with admirable wisdom.

Human failure never surprised God – though it grieved Him. God knew everything in advance – but we did not. If He hadn’t tested man in



every possible way, it wouldn't have become clear that people can *only* be saved by grace.

God has tested mankind with great patience and wisdom over the centuries:

- › in Paradise – under “ideal conditions”
- › with a built-in “sin early warning system” (the conscience)
- › under a government that punishes evil (Noah)
- › through calling in connection with tremendous promises (Abraham)
- › under the law (with and without a king, with and without prophets, etc.).

What more could God have done? God tried everything with mankind, even though He knew beforehand that everyone would fail.

In the final test, under the law, it was the worst. Mankind not only broke the law but, when God sent His Son – “born under the law” (Galatians 4:4) – men used this law to condemn the Son of God and the giver of the law(!) as guilty: “We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die” (John 19:7).

This proved man's ruin. He was morally bankrupt. Therefore, God stopped testing¹ man as such. Subsequently God introduces two more dispensations, with a specific purpose:

¹ Today, God still tests believers to give them the opportunity to prove their faith (James 1:2-3). In this sense, God tests the faith of individuals, but He no longer tests mankind as such. More on this in Chapter 5, *Building Block 6*, p. 65.

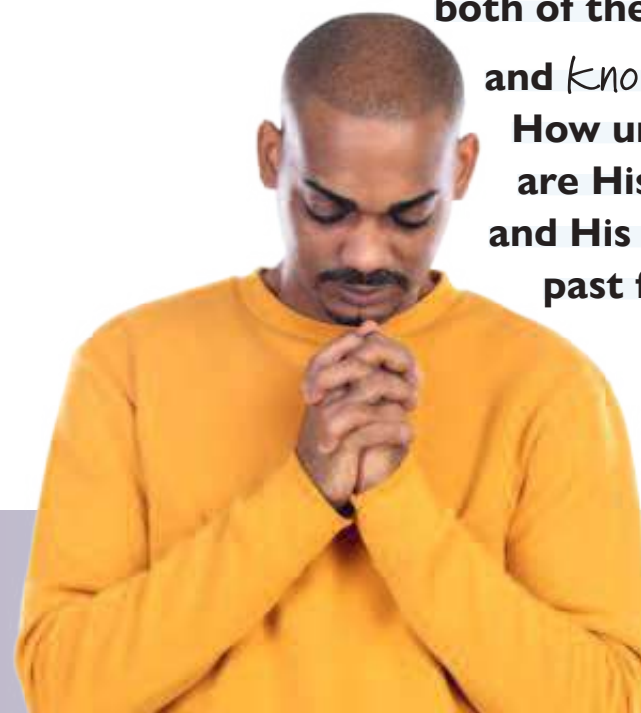
1. The Time of Grace: In this time period, God glorifies Himself by using mankind's total failure and its greatest sin – the crucifixion of the Son of God – as an occasion to pour out far greater blessings (more on this in Chapter 6, page 85). He wants to show how much He has been satisfied through the redemptive work of His Son. Therefore, He lavishes blessings on those who belong to His Son.

2. The Millennial Kingdom: In this time period, God fulfills His plan for the earth – despite man's failure. He had intended for a man, Adam, to rule over the whole earth, with Eve by his side. After the fall, everything seemed over. Sin had entered the world, bringing a flood of misery and suffering. To this day, the whole creation “groans” under these tragic consequences (Romans 8:22). But God will ensure that His plan is fulfilled: Christ will *Reign* as the *Son of Man*, with the church by His side, not just over the earth but *over the entire universe* (Psalm 8:6-7; Ephesians 1:22).

Once the purpose of the dispensations of the history of God's dealings with mankind is understood, one will not reject them but, with Paul, exclaim in admiration:

**“Oh, the depth of the riches
both of the wisdom
and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable
are His judgments
and His ways
past finding out!”**

(Romans 11:33)



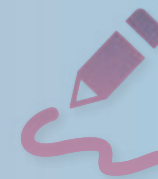
MIDWAY RECAP

We've identified that there have been significant milestones in God's dealings with mankind, each marking the start of a new time period. It isn't critical whether one counts six, seven, or eight dispensations. What's essential is recognizing (at least) the following significant break points:

1. The coming of Christ (leading to the division into the Old and New Testaments)
2. The law (resulting in the division into times before and after it was given)
3. The return of Christ to earth (marking the boundary between the Age of Grace and the Millennial Kingdom¹).

Understanding these three events can help you begin to properly comprehend the Bible. You'll notice how one (apparent) contradiction after another gets resolved (see Chapter 2, p. 35ff).

1 We'll discuss the interim period later. See Chapter 5, *Building Block 9*, p. 75.



QUESTIONS:

1. What signs indicate the beginning of a new dispensation?
2. What are the most critical dispensations that one should definitely distinguish?
3. What was the outcome of God testing mankind?
4. Why is eternity not one of these dispensations?

4. SOME OBJECTIONS

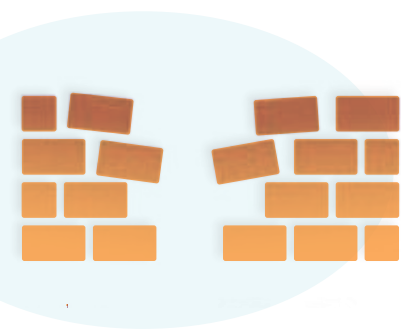
We've seen how crucial it is to distinguish different dispensations or eras in God's dealings with mankind. It's the key to understanding the Bible as a whole correctly. However, there are indeed serious Christians who consciously reject the dispensational approach. Therefore, we want to consider the main objections in the light of the Bible.

"There are no different dispensations in the Bible"

But there are. We've seen that the Bible clearly shows divisions, such as the giving of the law under Moses and the coming of Christ to earth. But there are also Bible passages that speak directly of a change in dispensation. Here's a small selection:

- › "For the law was given through Moses, but *grace and truth* came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).
- › "*The hour is coming* when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. [...] But *the hour is coming*, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:21, 23).
- › "He *takes away* the first that He may *establish* the second" (Hebrews 10:9). "The first" refers to the Levitical sacrificial service. God introduced it, and God took it away. "The second" is the perfect sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and Christian worship. The entire chapter shows the contrast between the old and new systems.

- › "... who has made both one, and has *broken down* the middle wall of separation, having *abolished* in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace" (Ephesians 2:14-15). The change in dispensation couldn't be clearer. There's a *before* and an *after*:



- Before, there were "the two" groups, Jews and Gentiles, separated by a middle wall of partition. The law commanded the Jews to stay separate from the Gentiles. These commandments were given by God Himself. He built the wall.
- But the time came when God *broke it down* again. The law of commandments was *abolished*. *What was previously separated by a wall is now brought together, united into a newly created man.*

Many other passages confirm that God periodically introduces new dispensations:

- › Exodus 6:3: God reveals Himself under a new name.
- › Jeremiah 31:31-32: God announces a new – and very different – covenant.
- › Galatians 4:1-5: God says that the Israelites were servants before the coming of Christ. Afterward came a completely new relationship: sonship.
- › Acts 3:21: Peter explains that the Lord Jesus had ascended into heaven. He makes it clear that another dispensation is still to come. Here too, we read of an "until".

- › Hebrews 1:13: God invites Christ to sit at His right hand "until" a specific time: until His enemies are made His footstool. Then comes the new dispensation, in which Christ will reign.

Thus, the Bible itself proves that there are different dispensations in God's dealings with mankind.

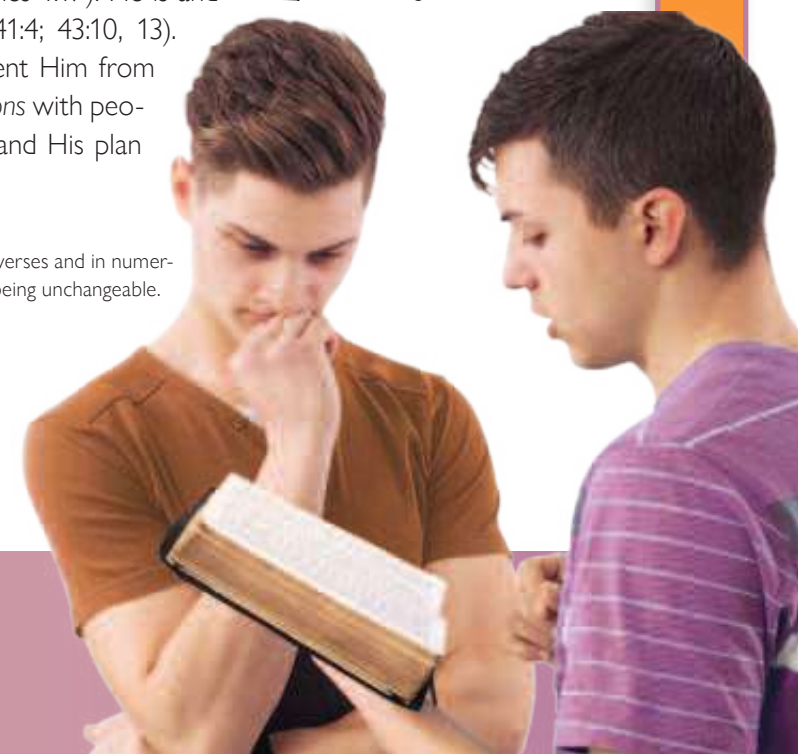
"Has God changed?"

This objection is used to dismiss the idea of dispensational change as absurd. If God's actions have changed from one time period to the next, it is argued, then God Himself must have changed. But this is a fallacy. The actions of a person can change for many reasons – such as a child growing up – but there can also be many other reasons (like changes in circumstances or in other people).

Of course, God is *immutable*: With Him, there is "no variation or shadow of turning" (James 1:17). He is and remains "the same" (Isaiah 41:4; 43:10, 13). However, this does not prevent Him from changing *His ways* and *His actions* with people, when it fits His wisdom and His plan of salvation.

Change in a person's actions
≠
Change within the person

¹ God's name "Jahwe" - used in these verses and in numerous others - carries the meaning of being unchangeable.



"Has God Changed His Mind?"

God does not change His mind without reason (Numbers 23:19). But if humans significantly change by turning away from God (Genesis 6:6; 1 Samuel 15:35) or by turning to God (Exodus 32:14), then God changes His actions towards that person.

Even when God introduces a new dispensation, He does so for good reason. He tests men under various conditions. When He has completed a specific test, it is up to Him to test mankind in another aspect – or to finally cease testing man as such, offering free salvation on the basis of pure grace. **God is sovereign.** We humans should not "reply against" or talk back to God (Romans 9:20).

"Has the Way of Salvation Changed?"

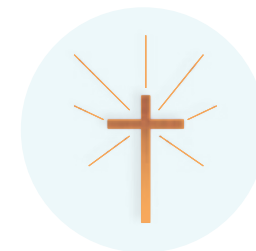
Asking this question confuses *testing* with *salvation*. They are not identical. This is easily illustrated with an example: God *tested* the people of Israel with the law from Sinai, but this law was not the way to *salvation*. **The way to salvation has always been through faith.** Abraham was justified by *faith* (Romans 4:3), and so was David (Romans 4:5-8). And to this day, a person is "justified by faith" (Romans 5:1).

The way to salvation has always been:
faith.

What has changed is the content of the revelation:

- › Abel believed, likely having learned from his parents, that the death of a substitute was necessary for a sinner to approach God.
- › Abraham believed that God would grant him numerous descendants (Genesis 15:6).
- › The jailer in Philippi, living after the cross, had to believe in the Lord Jesus (Acts 16:31).

The way of salvation has always been the same: through faith in what God has revealed up to that time.



The *foundation of salvation* has not changed either. It has always been the work of Christ on the cross. On this basis, God could overlook the sins of believers in the Old Testament (Romans 3:25).

"Didn't God Know in Advance that Man Would Fail?"

This too is a fallacy. Of course, God knew in advance that man would fail. The issue was that we humans did not know. Through the various dispensations, God has *demonstrated* that man fails as soon as he is placed under responsibility.

God is sovereign!
We neither have to
understand Him nor can
we accuse Him.



"Has God's Plan Failed?"

This objection is used to suggest that the introduction of new dispensations assumes that God's previous plans have failed so that He had to come up with something new. Such thoughts are entirely inappropriate.

It isn't God's plan that has failed, but mankind. The sequence of dispensations shows that, despite everything, God's plan is ultimately fulfilled: In one dispensation after another, man has turned out to be hopelessly inadequate. In the last two dispensations, it is demonstrated that God still achieves His goal.

"Those who think in terms of the history of God's dealings with mankind just put everything in boxes!"

There's a grain of truth in this objection. Yes, thinking *in terms of the history of God's dealings with mankind*, does involve categorization. It assigns specific statements to the groups of people and dispensations they concern.

However, this doesn't fragment the Bible; it acknowledges it in its entirety. To see this, take the request „Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow" (Psalm 109:9). The insight that this prayer is not appropriate for a Christian is very helpful. Putting this prayer into its proper context does not fragment the Bible. On the contrary: contextualising this request is necessary to understand it properly.

Those who recognize dispensations and, therefore, don't travel to Jerusalem three times a year (Deuteronomy 16:16), aren't being disobedient. They know the law addresses those "under the law" (Romans 3:19). Conversely, those who *neglect* or even reject dispensational contextualization must face the question of why they don't travel to Jerusalem three times a year, don't celebrate the Feast of Trumpets, and don't live in booths.

Contextualization might seem laborious at first, but it is rewarded with much clarity and understanding. If you take into account the proper context of each verse of the Bible this is by no means a sign of contempt of God's Word. On the contrary: it demonstrates reverence and respect.

"The doctrine of dispensations is too modern to be true!"

Some reject the dispensational approach on the grounds that it was only developed in the 19th century. However, consider this:

- › The measure of a doctrine's truth is not its age but God's Word. The right question is: "What does the Scripture say?" (Romans 4:3).
- › As we've seen, many Bible passages speak of significant break points at which God changed the rules that applied to man. Therefore, the concept of dispensations is as old as the Bible itself.



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5. MORE THAN DISPENSATIONS: CORE TRUTHS

The Bible paints a clear picture. It shows break points in God's dealings with mankind, each marking the start of a new dispensation. Understanding this takes you a long way forward.

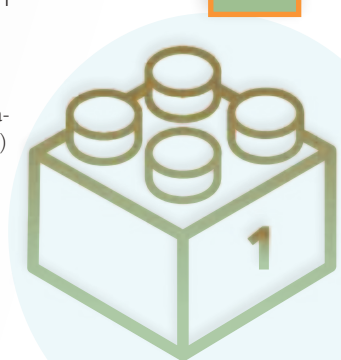
But *knowing* these dispensations isn't enough. More important are certain principles or "Building Blocks" that help us *understand* these time periods – and especially the unique status of the Christian era or dispensation.. Only then can we grasp how richly blessed we are as Christians. And only by understanding the peculiarities of the Christian time period can we live with an insight into God's thoughts – for His glory.

Building Block 1: Literal Interpretation of the Bible

To understand the Bible, we must take God at His word. God means what He says – and He says what He means. Reading the Bible this way, we quickly realize:

- › *Israel* is a nation (the descendants of Abraham or Jacob). The *church*, however, consists of all believers who have faith in Jesus Christ.
- › Christ will return. He will take the church out of this world (at an event known as the Rapture¹).

¹ The word "Rapture" is derived from a Latin term and signifies "snatching away". 1 Thessalonians 4:17 teaches that believers will be "caught up" (or "snatched away" or "raptured") by Christ to meet the Lord in the air and to be forever with Him. So, although "Rapture" is not a Bible word, it accurately describes a Bible truth. The same Greek word is used to describe how Paul was "snatched away" and in this way rescued from the angry mob (Acts 23:10). Interestingly, it is also used in the symbolical description of Christ ascending to heaven (Revelation 12:5).



- › Later, He will appear in glory to establish His Kingdom.
- › The nation of Israel has a national future: It will one day possess the land of Israel when Christ reigns.
- › This reign of Christ will be a thousand-year reign of peace, a literal Kingdom on earth.
- › The church, on the other hand, has a heavenly future.

We will discuss all these points further, along with evidence from the Bible.

However, there are people (even believers) who do not believe in this future. When shown the clear statements of the Bible, they say these are to be understood “allegorically” (symbolically) and have already been fulfilled in the church.

For example, you point out that according to Psalm 2:6, God will set His King on Zion, His holy hill, meaning Christ will rule from Jerusalem. But proponents of the allegorical method respond that Christ is already reigning, Zion is heaven, and the “holy hill of Zion” is also heaven. You ask in amazement if they haven’t read further: The Messiah will break the nations with a rod of iron. Well, they say, that’s a symbol of Christ’s reign of grace You’re left astounded. Could there be a more inappropriate symbol for grace than a “rod of iron” dashing the nations in pieces?

When you ask how to understand the many promises God made to His people Israel about a blessed national future for Israel, they reply that these promises have been spiritually fulfilled. That this cannot be the case we will see later (*Building Block 4*, p. 56).

That the allegorical method is incorrect is demonstrated by the following considerations:

- › It changes the meanings of words. Doing this strips language of its meaning. Binding communications are rendered impossible.
- › Proponents of the allegorical method apply it selectively (especially to prophecies referring to the time after Christ’s resurrection).
- › This method was first used by philosophers (e.g., Philo), who wanted to alter the Bible so that it would no longer contradict Greek philosophy. The goal was to *change* the meaning of the Bible (not to *explain* it)..

It is evident that the Bible must be taken literally:

- › The writers of the Old Testament understood prophecies literally (compare 1 Kings 13:2 with 2 Kings 23:15-16: It was literally about the birth of a child named Josiah).
- › So did the writers of the New Testament (compare Matthew 1:22-23 with Isaiah 7:14 – it was literally a virgin: Mary).
- › Christ Himself uses the literal method (compare John 19:28 with Psalm 69:21). He was given literal vinegar to drink.
- › The prophecies that have been fulfilled were all fulfilled literally, e.g., the Lord’s birth in Bethlehem, the crucifixion, the piercing of His side, the giving of vinegar to drink, and the resurrection.

The literal method – taking the Bible, indeed God Himself, at His word – is the biblical method (sometimes called “literal interpretation”). Those who take the Bible at its word quickly realize that there are dispensations in the history of God’s dealings with mankind. This discovery enables them to understand the Bible as a whole.

- ✓ Literal Method = taking the Bible at its word
- ✗ Allegorical Method = interpreting unfulfilled prophecies

Does this mean everything is meant literally, and there are no symbols and allegories?

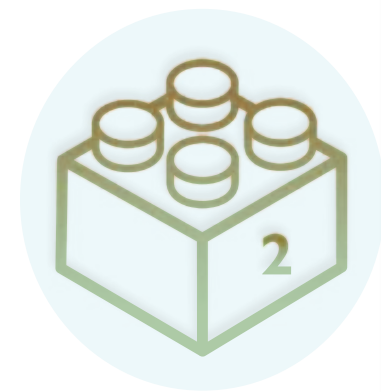
SYMBOLS AND ALLEGORIES

Of course, the Bible contains many symbols, especially in the Book of Revelation. These symbols are undoubtedly meant as such – but they are used to describe real events. For example, Isaiah 40 announces the coming of John the Baptist (v. 3). As the New Testament proves, this was meant literally (Matthew 3:3). The fact that the next verse uses symbolic language (“Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low”) doesn’t change that.

Likewise, the Bible contains allegories, i.e., events with a spiritual meaning (Galatians 4:24). Abraham’s sacrifice of his son Isaac was a “figure” showing that God would give His Son (John 3:16). But that doesn’t change the fact that Abraham literally placed his son on the altar. It happened just as described in Genesis 22.

The same applies to prophecies of future events. They contain spiritual teachings, but they will literally come to pass. An example is Ezekiel’s temple (Ezekiel 40-48). One can draw spiritual lessons about God’s dwelling from it (just as from Solomon’s temple). But Ezekiel’s temple will be built in Jerusalem, literally – just as Solomon’s temple was.

Building Block 2: Progressive Revelation



From mankind’s earliest days, God has “revealed” Himself. This happened through direct communications and through His actions (such as creation or the liberation of Israel from Egypt). Whenever God gave a revelation, it was absolutely true.

Speaking of *progressive* revelation doesn’t imply that God contradicts Himself (unlike in science, where today’s knowledge may be *superseded* by tomorrow’s). God’s revelation is never superseded, only *supplemented*.

Each additional revelation builds upon those given before. It’s as if the curtain is gradually pulled aside. Each time, aspects previously unseen become visible. Yet, everything seen before remains true. The fact that God introduces new “rules” from time to time changes nothing. Example: God gave the law to the people of Israel at Sinai. This is still true today, but it doesn’t mean Christians are under the law – see Romans 6:14.

So, progressive revelation means:

1. Messages were given step by step.
2. All of God’s messages remain true (even if He introduces or changes rules, nothing He previously communicated becomes false).
3. Human responsibility at any given time depends on the revelation God has provided up to that point.



PROGRESSIVE REVELATION AND THE NAMES OF GOD

Progressive revelation is also evident in God introducing Himself under different names throughout history (see Exodus 6:3). Each name of God carries special meaning:

- › God revealed Himself in creation as *Elohim*.
- › To the patriarchs, He appeared as *El Shaddai*, the *Almighty* (Genesis 17:1).
- › To Moses, He introduced Himself as *Jehovah* or *Jahwe*, the *Eternal One* in a covenant relationship with His people (often translated as “the *LORD*”).

No new revelation ever nullified the previous ones.

- For example: God didn’t say,

“I am now the LORD. I used to be the Almighty,”

but,

“I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty” (Exodus 6:2-3).

THE FULL REVELATION OF GOD IN THE SON

The New Testament confirms that the Old Testament revelation of God came in many parts and was therefore always fragmentary (perfect in itself but still incomplete):

“God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets ...” (Hebrews 1:1).

Interestingly, in the same sentence it shows that God has finally and fully revealed Himself in His Son:

“... has in these last days spoken to us by His Son” (Hebrews 1:2).

Jesus Christ, the Son, didn’t just *bring* the revelation; He *was* the revelation of God. What God was could not only be *heard from* Him but also *seen* in Him. Only He, the eternal Son who had always enjoyed the Father’s love (John 17:24), could reveal who God is (John 1:18). This revelation includes:

- › The truth about God as the *Trinity* of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- › That now, those who believe in the Son also get to know His Father as their Father. After the resurrection of Jesus Christ, He declared:

“I am ascending to My Father and your Father ...” (John 20:17).

It’s great to know God as the *Creator* and as the *Almighty* (like Abraham knew Him). It’s even greater to know Him as the *LORD*, the *Unchangeable*, the *Everlasting*, who enters a special *relationship* with His people. But all this is far surpassed by the privilege of knowing Him as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and of knowing the Father as *our Father*.

When God reveals more of Himself, it affects human responsibility. No wonder there are different dispensations of the history of God’s dealings with mankind, in which God deals differently with people.

the Creator,
the Almighty,
the LORD,
the Unchangeable,
the Everlasting,
MY FATHER!

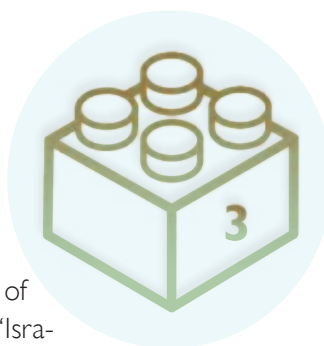


THE REVELATION OF THE TRUTH ABOUT THE CHURCH



The truth about the church is another example where we can see progressive revelation. In the Old Testament, there was no church, and nothing was known about it. God provided figures like *Eve* and *Rebekah* – but without the New Testament, one could not discover the truth about the church. It remained a mystery. It was only unveiled after Christ had risen and was glorified in heaven (Romans 16:25; Ephesians 3:5, 9).

Building Block 3: Israel and the Christian Assembly



The nation of *Israel* consists of the descendants of the 12 sons of Jacob (Jacob was given the name “Israel” by God; see Genesis 32:28; 47:27). The Old Testament primarily deals with this nation, its history, and its future.

The church only appears in the New Testament. After Christ had risen and ascended to heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit to the earth to baptize believers from all nations into one body (Acts 1:5; 1 Corinthians 12:13). Thus, the *church of the living God* was formed (1 Timothy 3:15). The New Testament shows that the church is the body, and Christ is the head (Ephesians 1:23; Colossians 1:18). This close link between Christ and the church is also referred to the *mystery of Christ*. It is not mentioned in the Old Testament at all (Ephesians 3:5, 9). The prophets never spoke of it.

By the way, the church could not have been formed before the Holy Spirit had come. This was only possible after Christ had died and was glorified in heaven (John 7:39), as the Holy Spirit was to testify specifically of Him, the glorified Man at the right hand of God (John 15:26; 16:14).



SOME OBJECTIONS

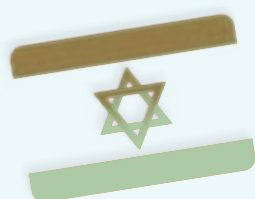
Unfortunately, the distinction between Israel and the church is not clear to all Bible readers. Some believe, the church is somehow part of or even identical with Israel. Therefore, some clarifications follow:

- › **Congregation (some translate it as “church” or “Assembly”) in the wilderness:** Stephen speaks of the *congregation in the wilderness* (Acts 7:38), using the same Greek word (*ekklesia*) and referring to the nation of Israel. This shows that the word has several meanings. It refers to a gathering of people. Sometimes it means Israel, sometimes a city assembly or a political gathering (Acts 19:32, 39). However, in the New Testament, it normally refers to the church.
- › **Israel of God:** Paul uses this expression in Galatians 6:16. This verse by no means proves that the church is referred to as “Israel”. It rather refers to *people from Judaism* who have come to faith in Christ (compare Romans 11:5).
- › **Descendants of Abraham:** In Romans 4, Abraham is called “the father of us all” (vv. 16-17). Therefore, some say, we all belong to the nation of Israel. But that’s not what it says. Romans 4 deals with the question of justification. Paul demonstrates that in both the Old and New Testaments, justification is by faith alone. Abraham believed, and in this sense, he is the father of all who believe. There’s no mention of “Israel”.

ekklesia

= a gathering
of people
and

= church,
all believing
Christians



"ISRAEL" AND "ISRAELITES" IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament consistently differentiates between Israel and the church. The following passages make this unmistakably clear:

- › 1 Corinthians 10:32: There are three groups: Jews, Gentiles (Greeks), and the church of God. Clearly, the church of God (Group 3) is not the same group as the Jews, i.e., the people of Israel (Group 1).
- › It is true that the middle wall of separation (Ephesians 2:14) has been torn down. But this fact refers to believing Christians. God calls *out individuals* from Israel and other nations to form something new, the church. *Within* the body of Christ (this church), there is no dividing wall: Believers from Israel and the nations form *one* body. But the church is clearly distinguished from the Jews.
- › Romans 9:1-5: Paul refers to "those of my own race" as "*Israelites*." One of their characteristics is that Christ, in terms of His natural descent as a man, comes from this people. This cannot possibly apply to the church. Christ does not come from it, but He announced He would build it (Matthew 16:18).
- › Romans 9:31-10:1: Those belonging to *Israel stumbled* over Christ as the stumbling stone. Those belonging to the *church* have *accepted* Him.

The word Israel appears about 70 times in the New Testament. All these instances show that when God says *Israel*, He means *Israel* (see Romans 11:25-28; 2 Corinthians 3:13-16; etc.). Those from Israel who

have believed in Christ belong to the "called out," i.e., the assembly, and are therefore generally not referred to when "Israel" is mentioned.

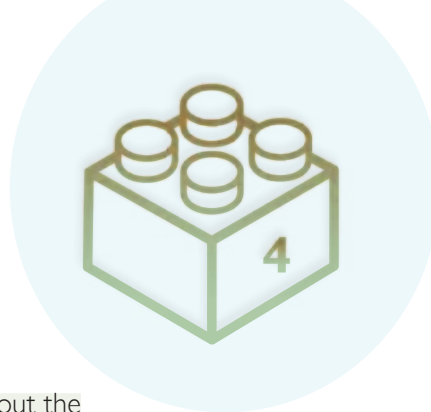
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND ISRAEL

The church has a completely different character than Israel. It is not Israel, nor a continuation of Israel. The following table summarizes the main differences between Israel and the church. These prove they are not the same entity.

	Israel	Church
Known in the OT?	Yes	No
Beginning	With Abraham/Isaac/Jacob	Pentecost, after the Resurrection of Christ
Membership	Natural descent	Faith
Connection to Christ	Messiah on earth	Head in Heaven
	Still blinded	Already united with Him
Relationship Among Members	One nation	One body (organism)
Origin	Earthly	Heavenly
Nature	Earthly	Heavenly
Future	Earthly	Heavenly
Blessings	Material (essentially, see Romans 9:5)	Spiritual



Building Block 4: Israel Has a Future



The Old Testament contains many promises about the national future of Israel: It will possess the land of Israel and live there under the reign of the Messiah in peace and prosperity. These prophecies paint a clear picture. They also clarify how the Millennial Kingdom will be established:

1. First, a time of extreme distress (the "Tribulation") will come for Israel (*Building Block 9*).
2. A believing remnant will be saved by Christ (*Building Block 9*).
3. Christ will appear in glory (*Building Block 10*).
4. He will execute judgment to establish the Millennial Kingdom (Isaiah 26:9; Psalm 2:5-9).
5. Israelites scattered across the globe will be brought back to the land of Israel (Isaiah 11:11-12; Ezekiel 34:13-14).
6. The Messiah (Jesus Christ, the Son of David) will reign in Zion in peace and righteousness (Isaiah 2:3-4; 32:1).
7. His reign's center will be Israel, but it will also extend to other nations (Psalm 72:8-11; Isaiah 2:3-4; 11:10).
8. Israel will live in peace and safety in the land of Israel (Isaiah 32:18; Jeremiah 32:37).
9. Nature and creation will be transformed; the curse will be removed (Isaiah 35:1-7; Ezekiel 47:1-12).
10. The Millennium will last as long as the earth exists (Jeremiah 31:35-37; Daniel 7:14). In the New Testament, we learn that this will be for 1,000 years (Revelation 20:4).

BUT ISRAEL REJECTED THE MESSIAH — WHAT NOW?

When Jesus Christ was born, two tribes of the people of Israel were in the land (Judah and Benjamin – hence often simply referred to as Jews). After He lived among them for over 30 years and served publicly for about three years, they took a fatal decision: They crucified their own Messiah. Incidentally, other nations are no better. The Romans, for instance were also involved (see Acts 4:26-28). This raises an important question for Israel: what are the consequences of having rejected their Messiah?



For the people of Israel, the question arises as to the consequences of having rejected their Messiah. Is Israel still God's people? Has God rejected them? Have the predictions about the coming Millennial Kingdom become null and void? Let's look at these questions one by one.

1. Are they still God's people?


It is true that God currently no longer recognizes Israel as His people. This has been the case since the deportation to Babylon in 606 BC. Then, after they crucified Christ, God allowed them to be driven out of their land by the Romans. In this sense, Israel has been set aside. There's no question about it. The question is whether Israel has been irrevocably set aside forever.

2. Has God rejected them forever?

Paul distinctly answers this question in the negative:

"I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not!"
(Romans 11:11)





He further explains that Israel's "fall" will eventually be followed by their "fullness" and that their *rejection* will eventually lead to their *acceptance* (v. 12, 14). At the end of the chapter, he summarizes:

**"For I do not desire, brethren,
that you should be ignorant of this mystery ...,
that blindness in part has happened to Israel
until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and so all Israel will be saved,
as it is written: 'The Deliverer will come out of Zion,
and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob'" (vv. 25-26).**

3. Have the predictions about the coming Millennial Kingdom become null and void?

Absolutely not. After Israel's "hardening" (which, nationally, continues to this day), Israel's salvation by the Messiah Himself follows (see point 2).



WHAT GUARANTEES DOES ISRAEL HAVE FOR ITS NATIONAL FUTURE?

Israel's future is assured. God has provided His people with several guarantees. Let's briefly look at the most important ones:



GUARANTEE #1: THE PROMISES OF THE PROPHETS



God has repeatedly given promises to His people. He sent prophets who described the coming Millennium (see the 10 points in the previous section and their biblical references). Many of these promises were unconditional. God is faithful. He keeps His word. God cannot lie (Titus 1:2).

GUARANTEE #2: CLEAR STATEMENTS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament confirms Israel's national future: The literal Millennial Kingdom on earth, where Israel will be blessed, will come. It does not cancel the Millennium – nor does it teach a "spiritual fulfillment" in the church as a "substitute". The following passages speak for themselves:

**"He will reign over the house of Jacob forever,
and of His kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1:33)**

Gabriel announces to Mary that she will have a Son who will receive David's throne and reign over "the house of Jacob" forever. It's an unconditional statement.

**"A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself
a kingdom and to return." (Luke 19:12)**

The Lord spoke this parable to show that the Kingdom of God would not come “immediately.” Christ (represented by the nobleman) travels to a “far country” to receive a Kingdom – and then to return. In the meantime, His servants conduct business on His behalf, while the citizens of His land hate Him. This is the Christian dispensation. Afterward, His rule begins.

“... whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began.” (Acts 3:21)

Peter confirms here that the promises of the prophets will be fulfilled – and that this has not yet happened. It is future. Until then, Christ is in heaven.

Many other passages provide further confirmation (see e.g., Acts 1:6-7; Romans 11:11, 25-31; 2 Corinthians 3:14-16; Ephesians 1:10; Hebrews 10:13; Revelation 11:15; 20:6).

GUARANTEE #3: THE COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

God made a covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:18-21). He promised him that his descendants would possess the land of Israel (from the Nile to the Euphrates (!)) in peace. This covenant:

- › has not yet been fulfilled;
- › was unconditional.

Therefore, it's clear: God is faithful, and He will fulfill what He promised Abraham. This will happen in the coming Millennial Kingdom.

GUARANTEE #4: THE COVENANT WITH DAVID

God also made a covenant with David (2 Samuel 7:11-16, Jeremiah 33:21; Psalm 89:4).

1. He promised him a descendant who would take over David's Kingdom “forever” (2 Samuel 7:11-16; 1 Kings 9:5).
2. The covenant is unconditional. The failure of David or his sons cannot break it.
3. Christ is this descendant who will reign “forever” (Luke 1:32).
4. It concerns rule “in the land” of Israel, as opposed to other nations on earth (2 Chronicles 6:16; 13:5-12; Jeremiah 33:15-17; Ezekiel 37:21-25).
5. Christ has not yet taken up this rule. He is not seated on David's throne (which is a throne on earth), but on the Father's throne (Revelation 3:21).

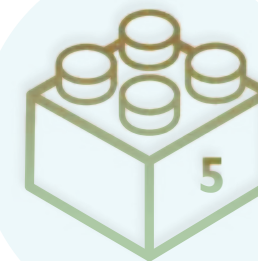
The Bible predicts a Kingdom where Christ will reign on earth.



GUARANTEE #5: THE NEW COVENANT

The New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34), which we will discuss in the next *Building Block* also unconditionally guarantees the people of Israel a future where Israel receives forgiveness of sins and lives in peace in the land of Israel under the rule of the Messiah.





Building Block 5: The New Covenant

It's fascinating that the New Covenant was announced through Jeremiah (Jeremiah 31:31-34), especially since it was Jeremiah who had to predict that Israel would lose the land due to its sin. Nebuchadnezzar would come and deport the nation.

This was the outcome of the old covenant that God made with Israel at Sinai. He promised blessings as long as Israel obeyed. But because they served idols instead of obeying, God had to expel them from the land.

Now, through Jeremiah, God announced the New Covenant. In it, God promises blessings unconditionally. The key phrase is not "you shall," but "I will". Specifically, God promises His people complete forgiveness:

**"For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."
(Jeremiah 31:34)**

And many more blessings are included – among them, the peaceful possession of the land. Throughout this section (Jeremiah 30–33), God reaffirms His intentions to bless with the phrase "I will," taking sole responsibility for keeping the covenant.

This raises the question of how this is possible. How can God assure full forgiveness and a blessed future to such a guilty people – a people who had to be driven out of the land?



THE FOUNDING OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL IN 1948 – FULFILLED PROPHECY?

Since 1948, there has again been a state of Israel. Jewish people, scattered across the globe for over 1,800 years, have returned to the land of Israel. This was an astounding event – unparalleled in history.

How should this situation be interpreted? Is it the fulfillment of biblical prophecy? Is it a preparatory development? Or is it perhaps an unfortunate development (possibly even through the meddling of Christians who believe in a national future for Israel)?

Anyone who has read up to this point can easily answer these questions:

- › Israel has God's promise for a national future in the land.
- › However, this will begin with Christ appearing in glory and establishing His Millennial Kingdom on earth.
- › Therefore, the emergence of the modern state of Israel in 1948 is at best a preparatory development.

As Christians, we need not "help along" God's plans for Israel. Of course, any form of anti-Semitism is to be sharply condemned. On the other hand, as Christians, we can be sure that God Himself will fulfill His promises in His own time.

*God fulfills His promises
at the right time.*

The Lord Jesus answered this question. He announced His impending death with the words:

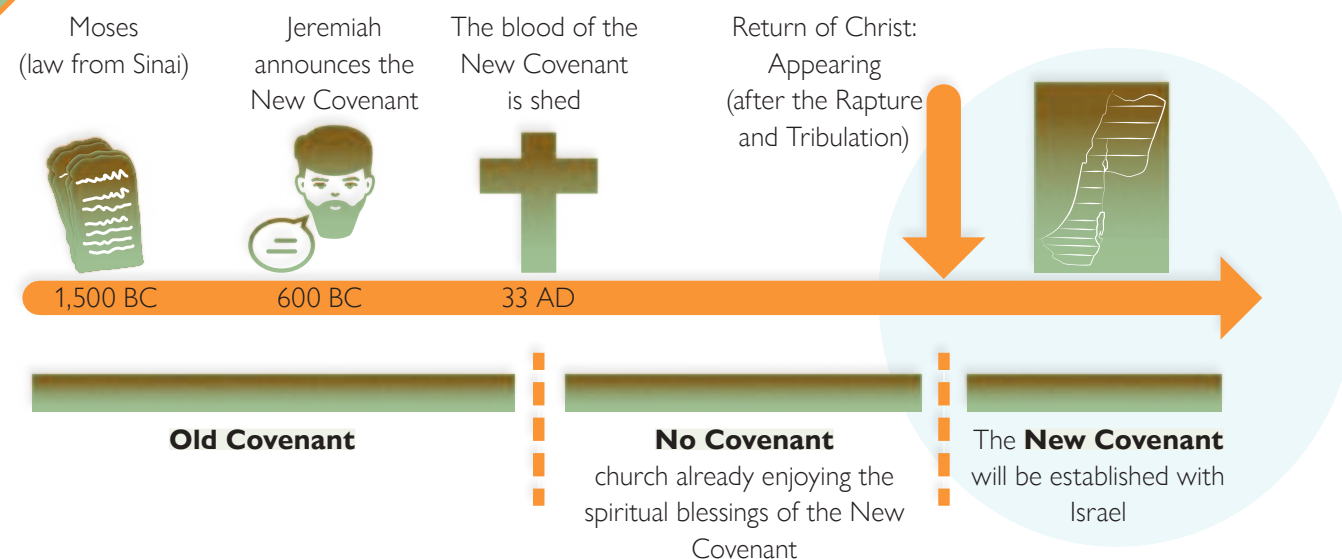
**“This is My blood of the new covenant,
which is shed for many for the remission of sins.” (Matthew 26:28).**

His blood would be shed. That alone is the basis on which He can bless His people (and thus fulfill the promises to Abraham and David).

CHRISTIANS AND THE NEW COVENANT

As Christians, we are not under a covenant. Yet, we know Christ's blood and have complete forgiveness through it. No one needs to be disappointed. We possess all the spiritual blessings of the New Covenant even in a deeper sense than Israel ever will. In addition, we receive better blessings, namely spiritual instead of material, and heavenly instead of earthly (Ephesians 1:3).

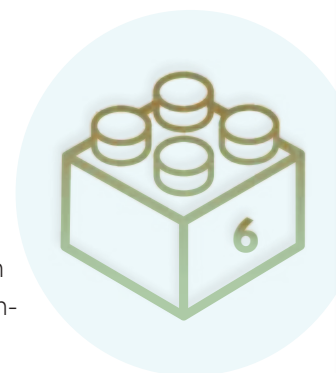
Figure 2: The New Covenant



DOES THE NEW TESTAMENT CHANGE THE NEW COVENANT?

The New Covenant is not changed by the New Testament. Its content and the parties involved remain the same. Hebrews 8 confirms that the New Covenant will be made in the future with “the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (v. 8). Additionally, God keeps His word. He doesn’t need to revoke any previous communications (*Building Block 2*). Revelations are added, supplemented, or expanded, but God does not backpedal.

Building Block 6: The Testing of the First Man Ends at the Cross



The Cross of Christ not only marks a division between two dispensations but also separates the Christian dispensation from all preceding ones.

God has thoroughly tested mankind over the centuries, not just in Paradise, and not in only one way, but in a variety of ways and under all possible conditions: through conscience, through government, through the special favor of a calling, and through a law that meticulously prescribed what to do and what not to do.

The result:

***The first man under responsibility
has consistently failed,
in every dispensation.***

THE CROSS AS THE FINAL TEST FOR THE FIRST MAN

The expression “the first man” primarily refers to Adam (1 Corinthians 15:47). But in a broader sense, all of Adam’s descendants are also of the “first man” type. We are all “of dust” and corrupted just like Adam (1 Corinthians 15:48). This “first man” repeatedly failed, culminating in the rejection of Christ. The following statements highlight the utter failure of the first man in rejecting Christ:

- › *The Lord of glory* was crucified (1 Corinthians 2:8). This means the place of greatest disgrace and shame was given to Him to whom belongs all glory!
- › The one in whom *all the fullness should dwell* was rejected (Colossians 1:19 and 2:9) – an inconceivable foolishness and audacity!
- › The *heir* was killed. Matthew describes how the rejection of Christ, presented in this Gospel as the King, the Son of David, leads to God’s judgment (Matthew 21:33-46).
- › The Son who brought the *revelation of the Father* was rejected. This rejection was such a great sin that it overshadows everything else (John 15:22, 24).

GOD NO LONGER TESTS THE FIRST MAN

Now, God no longer tests the first man. He begins the new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). Christ, as the risen Man, is the beginning of this new creation:

“... the beginning, the firstborn from the dead” (Colossians 1:18).

He becomes the new focus of attention: Christ, the “second” Man (1 Corinthians 15:47).

Since Christ, as “the firstborn from the dead,” sits in the place of honor “at the right hand of God,” God views Him as the new center for His dealings with men. Instead of testing, trying, or even expecting anything positive from them, He places Christ at the center. He alone is the way to salvation (Acts 4:12; 16:31). And He is the center, attraction, purpose of life, and standard for all believers (Galatians 2:20; Philippians 1:21).

This is God’s approach in the time of grace. He unites believers with the second Man (1 Corinthians 15:48-49).

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Of course, the individual’s responsibility remains. Through God’s Word and often through experience, one must come to accept God’s judgment personally. The unbeliever must recognize that he is lost, and the believer must accept that nothing good dwells in him (Romans 3:23; 7:18). Believers are still tested in their personal lives (1 Peter 1:6-7). And they remain responsible. Grace must not be abused (see Jude 4). But *the first man as such* is no longer tested.

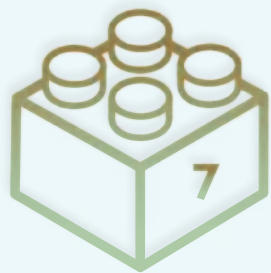
THE FIG TREE



This is clearly illustrated by the fig tree that Christ cursed (see Mark 11:12-14). It symbolizes the first man under responsibility. Christ cursed it to show that there will never be blessing on the ground of responsibility, only on the basis of grace.

The cross of Christ separates the Christian dispensation from all preceding dispensations.





Building Block 7: Christians Not Under Law

We now approach a critical question: What does the law from Sinai mean for Christians? Those who do not distinguish between dispensations might assume that Christians must adhere to the law from Sinai. Such readers of the Bible could:

- › Place themselves entirely under this law, necessitating adherence to all of its over 600 commandments, including dietary laws, animal sacrifices, ceremonial purification, etc.
- › Artificially divide the law (for instance, into moral and ceremonial laws), a distinction not found in the Bible, to “liberate” themselves from parts of the law.
- › Argue that certain regulations are “no longer applicable today,” which opens the door to arbitrariness.

In all three cases, this puts them at odds with New Testament statements: Christians are “not under law,” they have “become dead to the law,” and have “through the law died” (Romans 6:14; 7:4; Galatians 2:19). The law addresses only those who are “under the law” (Romans 3:19).

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT THE LAW

The law was given by God. Moses ascended Mount Sinai, and God presented him with the law, explicitly intended for “the children of Israel” (Exodus 19:1-3). No other nation on earth was ever under

this law (Deuteronomy 4:8). People not of Israelite descent have nothing to do with this law. Nonetheless, two prevalent views exist:

1. Some believe *justification* can be attained by adhering to the law.
2. Some think that as a believing Christian, one must follow the law as a kind of “rule of life.”

Both assertions are incorrect.

NO JUSTIFICATION THROUGH THE LAW

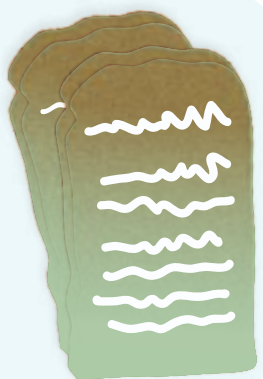
Certainly, the law itself was very good (Romans 7:12) – it came from God. It unambiguously established God’s “minimum requirements.” Those who complied could (theoretically) be justified (Leviticus 18:5). Why only theoretically? Because humans lack the power to do so. Hence, no one has ever been justified by the law (Romans 3:20; Galatians 3:11), but only through faith (Romans 5:1).

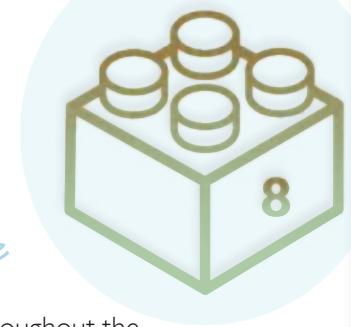
No one has ever been justified by the law!

THE LAW – NOT A RULE OF LIFE FOR CHRISTIANS

But, some might wonder: Shouldn’t Christians – once justified through faith – adhere to the law? An examination of the New Testament reveals that God has found a much higher path for Christians than attempting to keep the law:

- › Christians are “not under law” (Romans 6:14).
- › Even Christians from Judaism, who were once under the law, have died to the law:





Building Block 8: The Christian Hope

Christians are people who are waiting. This fact runs throughout the New Testament. This expectation is not one of anxiety or unrest. It is a joyful and hopeful longing, with the certainty that it *will* come to pass and that it *could* happen at any moment. This perspective brings joy and energizes endurance in serving Christ. Here are some scriptural references:

- › The faithful servant serves while waiting for their Lord. The wicked servant thinks, **“My master is delaying his coming,”** leading to terrible consequences (Matthew 24:45-51).
- › Christians should go out to meet the Bridegroom with *anticipation* (Matthew 25:1, 5).
- › Christians should be **“like men who wait for their master”** (Luke 12:36).
- › Christ is the “nobleman” who goes to a far country, leaving his servants with the command: **“Do business till I come”** (Luke 19:13).
- › As He was about to return to the Father, He comforted His disciples with the promise of His *return* (John 14:1-3).
- › Paul writes that we **“eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ”** (Philippians 3:20).
- › The Thessalonians were *waiting* for God’s **“Son from heaven”** (1 Thessalonians 1:10).
- › Paul lived in expectation of the Lord’s coming, writing: **“... we who are alive and remain shall be caught up”** (1 Thessalonians 4:17).
- › Christians *await* **“the blessed hope”** (Titus 2:13), the **“mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (Jude 21).
- › Christ repeatedly encourages with the words: **“I am coming quickly”** (Revelation 3:11; 22:20).
- › The church, as Christ’s bride, lives in this hope, saying, **“Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!”** (Revelation 22:20b).



The joy resonating within these verses is unmistakable.



- It isn’t the law that has died or been abolished, but Christians have died with Christ – including having died to the law (see Romans 7:1-6).
- The law still serves a purpose today, namely convicting sinners (1 Timothy 1:8-11).
- › The law signifies servitude, whereas the Christian position is one of sonship (Galatians 4:1-7).
- › Christ is the standard for our lives as Christians (1 Corinthians 11:1; Romans 15:3, 7; Ephesians 5:2, 25, 29; Colossians 3:13; 1 John 2:6; 3:16).
- We emulate Him, and the Holy Spirit empowers us (Romans 8:2).
- › Christians are neither lawless nor without responsibility. They are connected to a heavenly Christ and wish to please Him. They have a higher standard than the law.

WHY THE LAW THEN?

God gave the law to test mankind (using the people of Israel as an example). Man under the law (the Jews) declared the giver of the law (Christ) guilty of death and instigated His crucifixion. Since then, God is no longer testing mankind (see previous *Building Block*).

CONCLUSION



It isn’t enough to know when the Christian dispensation starts and ends. It’s also essential to understand the key features of the Christian dispensation. One of its characteristics is that Christians are not under the law.

BEFORE, DURING, OR AFTER THE TRIBULATION?

Fundamentally, this question is already answered by the Bible passages cited: Christians live in joyful expectation – at least, they can and should do so. Yet, some Christians believe that they will have to go through the Tribulation¹. This is mainly due to two questions:

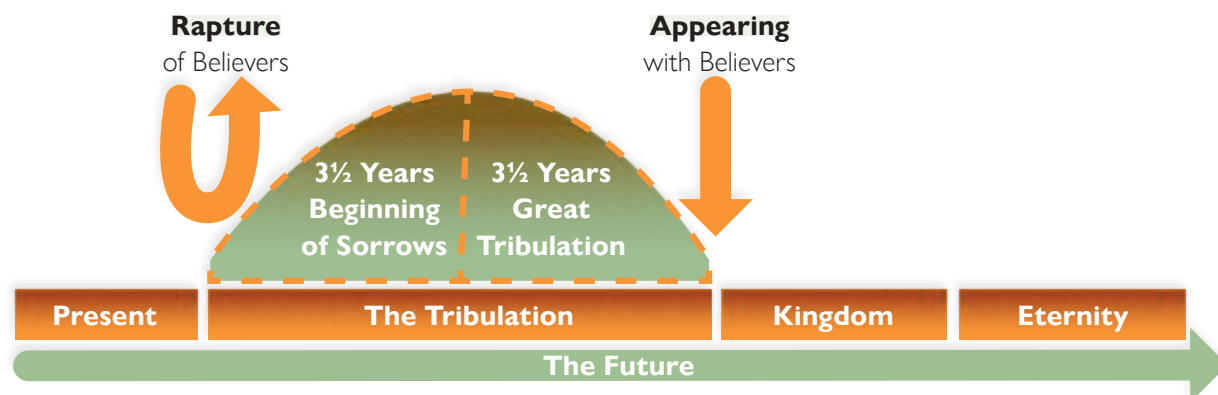
1. If all Christians are raptured before the Tribulation, who are the believers found in the Tribulation?
2. How can the Rapture occur before the Tribulation when some Bible passages speak of Christ's coming *after* the Tribulation?

The answers aren't too hard to find:

1. The believers in the Tribulation are those who live *after* the Christian time period (see *Building Block 9*). They are not Christians.
2. Christ's coming will occur in two phases: the Rapture and the Appearing. The Tribulation period lies in between.

The following diagram illustrates this timing:

Figure 3:
Two Phases of Christ's Coming and the Tribulation



¹ A period of seven years during which God will visit the world with severe disasters and judgments (Revelation 3:10; Revelation 6–18).

Let's look at two Bible passages that indicate the Rapture occurs *before* the Tribulation:

2 Thessalonians 2:1-2

False teachers had told the Thessalonians – in a forged epistle – that they were already in the Tribulation belonging to the “Day of the Lord” spoken of by the prophets. Paul clarifies that they need not fear experiencing the Tribulation because the Rapture, the **“gathering together to Him,”** would occur first (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2).

Revelation 3:10

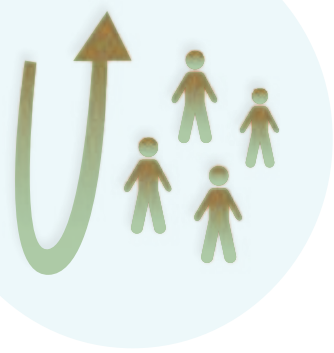
Here, Christ Himself promises to **“keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world.”** He doesn't say “rescue from” or “rescue after” the Tribulation but “keep from.” Hence, we won't even enter it. To clarify further, it's stated that He will keep us from the “hour” of trial – not just from a specific distress but from the entire period.

THE PROCESS OF THE RAPTURE

What exactly will happen at the Rapture? It will bring about massive changes for believers:

- › Believers from the New and Old Testament who have already *passed away* will be resurrected; they will receive a resurrection body (1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16).
- › Living believers will be transformed (1 Thessalonians 4:17).
- › Both groups will attain *conformity with His glorious body* (Philippians 3:21).
- › They will be *caught up* from the world (the word ‘Rapture’, like the Greek word used by the Apostle Paul, means to *snatch away*, *seize*). Believers will be taken away suddenly and very quickly.





THE CHARACTER AND SCOPE OF THE RAPTURE

The Rapture doesn't involve Christ *coming to earth*; instead, believers are caught up to meet Him "in the clouds in the air" (1 Thessalonians 4:17). The meeting between the Bridegroom and the Bride is "private." It will not be witnessed by the world.

At the Rapture, *all* believers will be caught up. Paul states: "we *who are alive* and remain shall be caught up together" (1 Thessalonians 4:17), not just *the particularly faithful ones*. The Rapture is an act of grace. It's the privilege of all believers.

THE OUTCOME OF THE RAPTURE

With the Rapture, all our troubles will end. Sorrow will belong to the past forever. In this sense, the Rapture is an act of mercy (Jude 21). But it has an even more beautiful aspect:

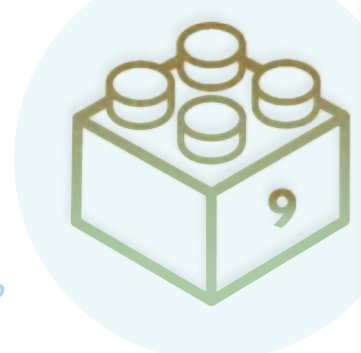
- › We will be *like Him* (1 John 3:2; Romans 8:29; Philippians 3:21).
- › We will see *Him as He is* now, as the glorified Man (1 John 3:2).
- › We will *always be with the Lord* (1 Thessalonians 4:17).
- › We will *behold His glory* (John 17:24).

It's a phenomenal prospect. It will be indescribable.

**"Therefore comfort one another with these words."
(1 Thessalonians 4:18)**



No Bible passage speaks of "Christians" during the time of Tribulation!

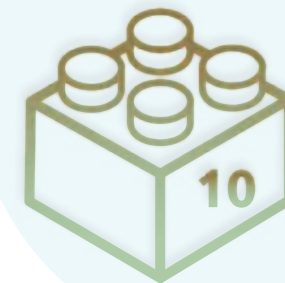


Building Block 9: Who are the Believers in Tribulation?

This brings us to the question of which believers will be on earth during the *Tribulation*. Clearly, according to Matthew 24, Revelation 13, and other passages, there will be believers. Interestingly, all Bible passages that speak of *Tribulation* indicate that the believers during the Tribulation are *not Christians*:

- › It's "*Jacob's trouble*" (Jeremiah 30:7) – that is, "Israel's."
- › It's the Tribulation for *Daniel's people* (Daniel 12:1) – the people of Israel.
- › They are believers in Jerusalem and its vicinity, who flee to the mountains *in Judea* and observe the *Sabbath* (Matthew 24:16, 20). Thus, they are Jews.
 - › They are believers who ask for *judgment on their enemies* (Revelation 6:9-11), which would be inappropriate for Christians (see Romans 12:17-21).
 - › The great multitude in Revelation 7 (vv. 9-17), who come "out of the great Tribulation," is *explicitly distinguished* from the 24 elders (v. 13). They are not Christians¹.

¹ The church forms part of the 24 elders, who are in heaven from Revelation 4 onwards.



IF THEY ARE NOT CHRISTIANS, WHO ARE THEY?

1. The Bible teaches there will be a group of believing Jews (descendants of Abraham), i.e., a “Jewish remnant”. This is necessary so that God can fulfill the covenant with Abraham. See Isaiah 10:22-23 and Romans 9:27.
2. This remnant
 - › has a Jewish messianic (not Christian) character – with Jewish values and earthly hopes.
 - › will proclaim the gospel of the Kingdom throughout the world (Matthew 24:14), leading many people, both Jews and Gentiles, to be saved (Revelation 7).
 - › will ultimately be saved and recognized by God as His people (Romans 11:25-26).
3. In both cases (believers from the Jews and the Gentiles), these are people who will have never heard the gospel of grace (2 Thessalonians 2:11-12).

BY THE WAY,

This topic highlights the importance of dispensations. Those who overlook them may think Christians must endure the Tribulation. Those who understand the differences between the dispensations can enjoy the “blessed hope” and look forward to the coming of the Lord Jesus with joy.



Building Block 10: Christ Appears – Before the Millennium

Jesus Christ will appear in power and glory on earth. Without knowing it, this is the greatest event that the world is heading towards. The Bible often and precisely speaks of this event. Let’s start with the Old Testament:

DANIEL 7:13-14

“Behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! ... Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him.”

Here, Christ is spoken of. He is the Son of Man (compare with Matthew 26:64).

ZECHARIAH 14:4-5

“And ... His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, ... Thus the LORD my God will come, and all the saints with You.”

He will literally come to this earth. What will be the outcome of this Appearing? Christ will reign:

“And the LORD shall be King over all the earth.” (Zechariah 14:9)



ISAIAH 30–32

In Isaiah 30 to 32, we encounter this sequence exactly: first the Appearing, then the Judgment, then the Millennium:

- › Isaiah 30: The LORD comes with great majesty (vv. 27, 30)
- › Isaiah 31: The enemy from the north (Assyria) is defeated by divine intervention (v. 8).
- › Isaiah 32: The Millennium begins. Christ reigns as King (vv. 1, 16-18).

THE APPEARING CONFIRMED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament *confirms* and *complements* the statements of the Old Testament:

MATTHEW 24

The most well-known Scripture concerning this event is the Lord's own statement:

“They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” (Matthew 24:30)

It will be a global event – unlike the Rapture, which is “private” – and will be unmistakable:

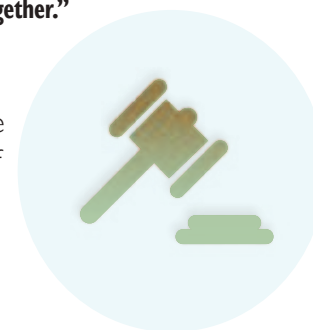
“For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.” (Matthew 24:27)

Lightning is unmistakable. The word “flashes” further emphasizes this point. The phrase “from the east ... to the west” indicates the global scope of this event.

The Appearing is for judgment. The Lord says:

“Wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together.” (Matthew 24:28)

The Son of Man will come to execute judgment on the “carcass,” i.e., on what is marked by the consequences of sin.

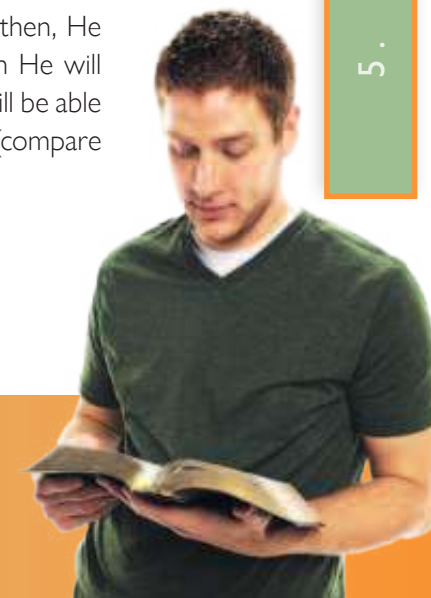


THE TIMING OF THE APPEARING

The Appearing, therefore, occurs *after the Tribulation of those days*, and *immediately* so (Matthew 24:29). It will be accompanied by massive supernatural events (the sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars will fall from the sky). This has never happened before. The same applies to the next verse (v. 30):

- › The sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven;
- › all the tribes of the earth will mourn;
- › they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven;
- › and that *with power and great glory*.

Christ came 2,000 years ago in humility and grace. Since then, He has been waiting patiently (Hebrews 1:13; 10:13). But then He will appear in such splendor that everyone will notice, no one will be able to effectively resist, and the tribes of the earth will mourn (compare with Revelation 1:7; Zechariah 12:10-14).



THE APPEARING IN REVELATION 19

Christ's *Appearing* is mentioned in the first chapter of Revelation: **"Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him"** (v. 7). This is the theme of the Book of Revelation. Christ is coming back to take possession of the earth and establish His Millennial Kingdom. He will assert His rights, which were disregarded at His coming in grace.

A detailed description of the *Appearing* is found in Revelation 19:11-21. It is the climax of the entire book.

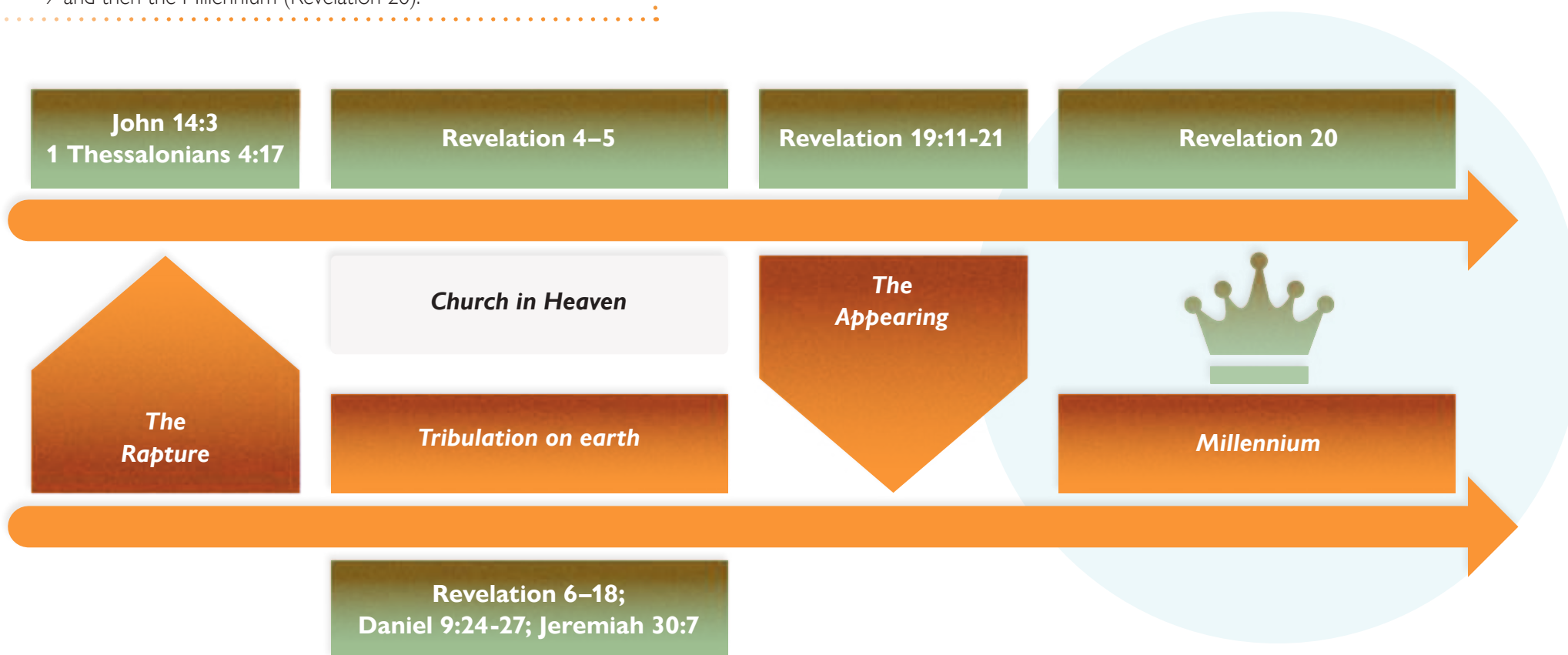
The Revelation also confirms the sequence of events:

- › First comes the time of Tribulation (Revelation 6–18)
- › followed by the Appearing (Revelation 19)
- › and then the Millennium (Revelation 20).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE APPEARING FOR BELIEVERS

Believers will receive rewards in "that day" (2 Thessalonians 1:10; 2 Timothy 4:8). Paul frequently uses phrases like *"the day of Christ"* or *"the day of Jesus Christ"* to emphasize the matter of accountability and reward (1 Corinthians 1:8; 2 Corinthians 1:14; Philippians 1:6, 10; 2:16). With these expressions, he encapsulates the Appearing and the subsequent Millennial Reign.

Figure 4: The Timing of the Appearing





A TRIUMPH FOR CHRIST



For Christ, the Appearing will be the moment of triumph and public recognition. His greatness and glory will be seen. He will come **“with power and great glory”** (Matthew 24:30) and **“in the glory of His Father”** (Matthew 16:27). It is the **“glorious Appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ”** (Titus 2:13). He will be **“glorified in His saints”** (2 Thesalonians 1:10).

These expressions give a glimpse of how momentous this event will be. On the earth, where He was crucified, His glory will be displayed (compare with Matthew 26:64). Every knee will bow to Him, and every tongue will confess that He is Lord (Philippians 2:10-11).

This is the main reason why we love His Appearing (2 Timothy 4:8).

QUESTIONS:

1. Can you name three of the 10 Building Blocks of sound biblical teaching, that affect you?
2. In what order do future events occur, and which Bible verses support this?
3. What is the purpose of the law, and what do Christians have to do with it?
4. What is the “Old Covenant” and what is the “New Covenant”?





6. A VERY SPECIAL DISPENSATION

The dispensation we live in, the Christian era, is a very special time. Believers of the Christian era possess blessings that have never existed in previous dispensations. This is because Christ has died on the cross. After that, God was able to pour out blessings like never before.

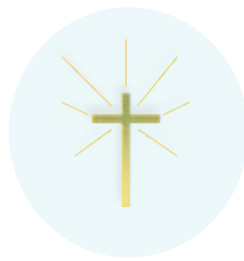
At first glance, this is astonishing. It was, after all, the pinnacle of failure when men nailed Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Lord of glory, to a cross. What could God do other than rain fire from heaven and eradicate all of mankind?

But God did the opposite: He opened His heart, without reserve, to sinful man — proclaiming that the Man on the cross was the gift of God's love. In answer to the work of Christ on the cross, God did two things:

- › He raised His crucified and buried Son, glorified Him as a Man, and gave Him the place of honor at His right hand.
- › He poured out blessings without limit on all who belong to this exalted Man. In this way, He demonstrated how much He values the work of His Son on the cross.

***All of this shows God's wisdom, love, and grace.
He has given immense blessings that were
unknown before the Christian dispensation.***

In this chapter, we will look at twelve specific blessings (there are more!) that belong exclusively to the Christian time. It is deeply impressive to consider the tremendous wealth God has given us.



A Completed Work of Redemption

Christ accomplished eternal redemption on the cross. This work satisfied the righteous demands of God, who had been deeply offended by sin. God demonstrated this by raising His Son from the dead (Romans 4:25).

Believers in earlier time periods knew the concept of acceptance with God through a substitutionary sacrifice. But they could never look back on a work of redemption accomplished by the Son of God.

A Glorified Man in Heaven

The Son of God was always with the Father, but not as a man. He became a man in the fullness of time, and after His death and resurrection, He received the place of honor *at the right hand of God, crowned with glory and honor* (Hebrews 2:9). Now there is a *glorified Man in heaven* (John 17:24).

This truth changes our whole perspective. The “Man in heaven” is the new center, the attraction, and the focus of the Christian. He guarantees our acceptance with God, He is our High Priest, Forerunner, Advocate, etc. The list is long. Every point is a treasure in itself.

The glorified Man in heaven is the starting point for every further blessing.



The Holy Spirit Dwells in Believers

Only after Christ was glorified in heaven could the Holy Spirit come to earth to dwell in redeemed people (John 7:39) because:

- › He was to testify of the glory that Christ received after His completed work (John 15:26).
- › Christ received the *promise of the Spirit* as a glorified Man in heaven (Acts 2:33). Only then could He pour out the Spirit for our blessing.

It's a tremendous privilege that the Holy Spirit, a divine person, dwells on earth: in believers *individually*, and in the church *collectively* (1 Corinthians 3:16; 2 Timothy 1:14).



Baptized into One Body

By the coming of the Holy Spirit, all believers on earth were baptized into one body, making them a living organism (1 Corinthians 12:13): All true believers worldwide are connected as members of the body of Christ. For this, Christ had to die, rise from the dead, and be glorified in heaven (Colossians 1:18). Christians have a vital connection with Christ as their head in heaven. He nourishes and guides them. This is the essence of Christianity: being connected with Him as the head in heaven.

Therefore, no Christian needs to start a church or join one. There is only *one* church, the church of the living God, the body of Christ. Whoever believes is already a part of it. Christians are invited and expected to assemble as members of the body of Christ (see Matthew 18:20; 1. Corinthians 14:23).



A Complete Revelation of God

God revealed Himself progressively: as Creator (*Elohim*), as the Almighty, and as the covenant God (*LORD, Jehovah, or Yahweh*). But all this pales in comparison to what Christians know and experience:

- › the revelation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit
- › access to the Father and fellowship with the Father.

As Christians, we know the Father (John 17:3). He is “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 1:3), but He is also our Father (John 20:17; 1 John 3:1). We are free to say “Abba, Father” (Romans 8:15) and, in doing so, we address God. Never in Old Testament times have believers enjoyed such knowledge of, and nearness to, God. This blessing had to be reserved for the Christian dispensation because:

- › First, the Son had to come, reveal the Father, and make atonement. Only He, the object of the Father’s love, could reveal Him (John 1:18; Hebrews 1:1).
- › This relationship can only be enjoyed through the Holy Spirit (John 14:17-20).

Worship in Spirit and Truth

The character of Christian worship is in stark contrast to the worship of God in other dispensations. It couldn’t be otherwise, because:

- › The work on the cross is finished.
- › God has been revealed.
- › God is known in a completely new *relationship* (as Father).
- › The Holy Spirit has come as the *power of eternal life* and brings about worship in spirit and truth.

This *shift in the nature* of worship marks a new time period, characterized by the worship of the Father. Christian worship is not ritualistic, through ceremonies, but *in spirit and truth* (John 4:23). We can speak directly to God and tell Him what we appreciate about Him and His Son.

Other passages confirm this change (1 Peter 2:5; Hebrews 10).

Christians are closely connected with what is heavenly.

A Heavenly Calling

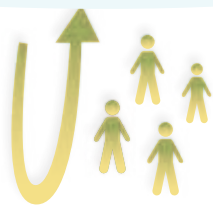
Christians are on earth but their origin, character, and destiny are heavenly: They possess eternal life (John 3:16), have died with Christ and have been made alive (Romans 6:8; Ephesians 2:5). They have a *heavenly calling* (Hebrews 3:1). Their interest is in eternal and thus invisible things (2 Corinthians 4:18).

Christians stand firmly on earth and fulfill their roles in their family and at work, yet they are citizens of heaven and strangers on earth. Their homeland is heaven (1 Peter 1:3-4; 2:11).

The same applies to the church. Its origin is heavenly: the church was formed by the Holy Spirit coming down from heaven (Acts 2:1-4, 32-33; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13). Its future destiny is also heavenly (see Revelation 21:10).

different relationship
↓
different worship





An Immediate Expectation

Christians possess a heavenly future, and they anticipate it *immediately*: Being in heaven could become a reality any day. Christians wait for the Son of God from heaven (1 Thessalonians 1:10). He Himself will come; whether we are alive or deceased and resurrected, we will be caught up together with Him in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. The result: we will “always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

This hope motivates us for service, it comforts us in hardships, inspires us in daily life, and provides direction and perspective. In no previous dispensation did believers enjoy such privilege: to wait for the Son of God from heaven and to live in this daily expectation (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10).

Under Grace, Not under Law

God gave the law to the people of Israel. Israel broke the law immediately, even before they held the tablets in their hands, and then subsequently millions of times over the centuries. The law was good, but humans lacked the strength to fulfill it.

Christians are not under the law (Romans 6:14). Christians from a pagan background were never under it, and Christians from a Jewish background are no longer under it, for they have died to the law (Romans 7:4).

The law is neither a way to justification nor the rule of life for Christians. We have only one standard: Christ. He is the only “rule of life” we have. We are to live in the Spirit’s power. This is sonship and freedom – the law, on the other hand, keeps people in bondage (Galatians 4:1-7).

Spiritual gifts

Christ, as the glorified and exalted Man, has given gifts to people so that the church, His body, might grow and be built up. For this, Christ descended and then ascended above all the heavens (Ephesians 4:7-11). Gifts, in this sense, are persons, for example, pastors, teachers, and evangelists. Furthermore, believers receive spiritual gifts or abilities (1 Corinthians 12). The Spirit of God uses these gifts – with the aim of building up the church and glorifying Christ.

Sons of God, Children of God

Another typically Christian blessing is that God has made us His children and His sons (and daughters). *Children of God* – those who consciously enjoy this relationship – could only exist after the Father had been revealed through the coming of the Son. Those who received Him were given the right to become children of God (John 1:12). Children of God have received a new, divine nature and can therefore have fellowship with God and find their joy in the Lord Jesus and His work. The Spirit gives us the consciousness that we are children of God. The future of God’s children is glorious. They will not only be co-heirs with Christ but will be in the Father’s house. There, they will forever behold and worshipfully enjoy the Father’s love.

Christians are also sons. By nature, we were far away from God. But God brought us near. He “adopted” us, He made of us His sons. Sonship is more about the position they have been brought into, whereas being children is more about the nature they now possess.



Objects of God's Eternal Purpose

Christian blessings are anchored in God's eternal purpose, established before the universe existed. This contrasts with the blessings of believers in other dispensations, who were "blessed ... *from the foundation of the world*" (Matthew 25:34) – because their blessings relate to the earth. Christians, on the other hand, were chosen for immeasurably great blessings "*before the foundation of the world*" (Ephesians 1:3-4).

Conclusion

Christians have every reason to be thankful for living in a time when God pours out the richest blessings there have ever been.

Why only now? Why weren't these riches available before the Christian dispensation? It isn't because people have become *better* or believers more *faithful*, but because



- › the cross sealed the complete *failure* of man (which is the starting point for grace);
- › God took this outrage as an opportunity to lavish *blessings in abundance*;
- › the Son of God made *atonement* at the cross.

**Contemplating these things in prayer,
we can only marvel at God's infinite
grace and wisdom – and at the riches
He has given.**

QUESTIONS:

1. Name 2 special blessings of the Christian era and describe what they mean to you.
2. Where is the home and what is the true identity of a Christian?
3. Provide at least one reason why these special Christian blessings were not available in previous dispensations.

7. CONCLUSION: THE CONNECTING THREAD AND THE GLORY OF GOD

The Bible is the inspired Word of God. Its many books and chapters tell *one* grand story. The deeper our reverence for God and our love for Him, the more we will *follow* this thread and explore the overall meaning and message of the Bible.

To do this, we must distinguish the different dispensations in the Bible. Doing so does not fragment the Bible. On the contrary, it resolves the seeming contradictions and allows us to understand the Bible as a harmonious whole.

The Glory of God

The Bible is much more than a collection of individual writings. It is a harmonious whole, telling *one* (!) long story about the eternal God who created the universe and human beings. Throughout the history of time He pursued a remarkable course with mankind, in which He revealed His glory. Ultimately He brings people into His presence and into eternal and unimaginable happiness. It is the story of God, whose Son came from eternity into time, and from the spotless glory of heaven into the misery of the world, to rescue people from this world and bring them into glory. And in doing so, He proceeds in such a way that with every step, more of His greatness and glory is revealed. That is exactly His goal (Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14; Habakkuk 2:14).

Those who pay attention to the differences between dispensational periods recognize the “connecting thread” that runs through the Bible and through all dispensations: Throughout the various dispensations, God has glorified Himself by:

- › Testing mankind – with admirable and great *patience*;
- › In His *wisdom* and *grace*, giving mankind every conceivable chance;
- › *Demonstrating* that humans cannot come to God or please Him in their own strength;
- › Proving His *love* by responding, after about 4,000 years of continuous human failure, not with judgment but with the gift of His Son;
- › Taking the failure of “the first man” as an *opportunity* to introduce something even *better*: the *mystery* of Christ (Ephesians 3:4-5) – the connection between Christ and the assembly.
- › Reacting to the *failure* of the privileged people of Israel by setting them aside for a time and, on the other hand, offering salvation to individuals from Jews and the Gentiles (Romans 9–11);
- › Using a roughly 2,000-year parenthesis, during which Israel is set aside, to create His “masterpiece,” the church (Ephesians 2);
- › Using this offer of blessing to the nations to “provoke ... to jealousy” His own people Israel and bring them to repentance (Romans 11:11, 14);
- › Finding a way – although Israel spurned the only way of salvation and crucified their own Messiah – *to still fulfill His plan with Israel and for the earth* (Genesis 1:26; Psalm 8; Romans 9–11)
- › Proving that He is *holy* and executes the necessary judgment, yet remains *faithful* and fulfills His promises;
- › Demonstrating that He can and will *fulfill His eternal purpose*, despite men corrupting everything entrusted to them.

The Appropriate Response

The section of Romans that addresses these themes ends with an outburst of praise – for good reason:

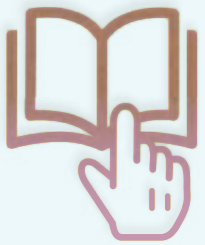
**“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are His judgments
and His ways past finding out!**

**For who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has become His counselor?**

**Or who has first given to Him
and it shall be repaid to him?**

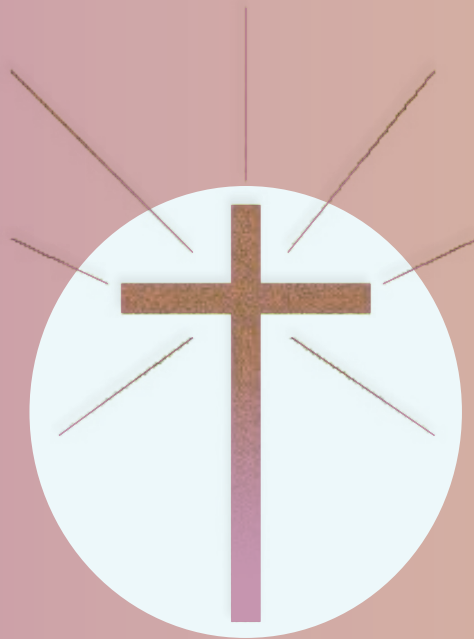
**For of Him and through Him
and to Him are all things,
to whom be glory forever. Amen.”**

(Romans 11:33-36)



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***If this brochure serves to (re)open the eyes
of one believer to the glory of God
and the wonder of His book,
then it has not been written in vain.***

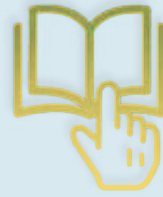


This brochure summarizes the book “*Discovering Biblical Dispensations - the Key to Understanding the Bible*”. You can order the book here: <https://www.believersbookshelf.ca/>



Read our online Bible





How can anyone understand the overall message of the Bible? How do the historical and prophetic books, the gospels, and the epistles fit together?

There is actually a connecting thread running through the Bible. And there is a simple method to discover it. Using this method, you can see how everything fits together. It explains things that, on the surface, seem contradictory.

Do you want to know how it works? Actually, it's quite simple: The Bible identifies a number of different time periods or “dispensations” in which God tested mankind in different ways. If you understand the different tests God used different dispensations, you will find it much easier to understand the Bible passages relating to these dispensations.

***This booklet provides
an overview of the various dispensations and
explains how you can understand
the Bible as one harmonious whole.***

Questions at the end of the chapters encourage you to check your understanding and to reflect on what you have read.

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