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### The Meaning of Dispensations and the Mystery

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## THE MEANING OF DISPENSATIONS AND THE MYSTERY

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF EPHESIANS  
NUMBER 24  
EPHESIANS 3:1-2

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EPHESIANS 3:1-2 "For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles, If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward:"

The book of Ephesians is designed to orient the believer to the plan of God with reference to the grace of God. As we begin the study of Chapter 3, we need to remember that every believer is in full-time Christian service. In eternity past God designed a plan for your life. You sit here today and say to yourself, "Yes, I'm a believer in Jesus Christ. I have made the great decision and I am saved." Now since this is true, God has designed a plan for you which is inner happiness. If you do not have this inner happiness you are a disoriented believer. So in substance this is what God says to us--"The only way I can change you from unhappiness to happiness is to orient you to the grace of God." Therefore, the first two chapters of Ephesians have been introductory. God has a plan for your life, and that is Ephesians 1. That plan was devised by a perfect person. The person designing the plan is perfect so the plan must also be perfect.

When we move into Chapter 2 we move forward to the concept of grace and how this grace was revealed to us at the cross. At salvation we were reconciled to God, but the principle behind reconciliation is "By grace are ye saved through faith." Therefore, once we are saved, we become his workmanship for the purpose of producing divine good.

In order to understand this we need to go back and orient ourselves to dispensations and the doctrine of the mystery. Please notice how this chapter begins--"For this cause." Then look down to verse 14 and you will see again the words "For this cause." So all that came in between these two phrases, "For this cause," is a parenthesis or an interruption or an insertion. Paul started out to write about prayer, then he interrupted himself and diverted his thinking and wrote all we have in these 13 verses and then down in verse 14 he picked up his idea again and started again by saying, "For this cause."

So Paul is not able to go on with his prayer until he gives a dissertation on three doctrines. The three doctrines are these--

1. Dispensations. He wants us to be oriented to time and history.
2. The doctrine of the mystery. This explains the Church Age.
3. The doctrine of the specialized ministry in the Church Age at which time every believer is in full-time Christian service.

This is, therefore, the chapter of the interrupted prayer. Paul started to pray, but he couldn't pray until he had clued them in on some important doctrine. He wanted them to be able to pray intelligently and to do this they had to know some doctrine. Now there are many people who believe we need less doctrine and more prayer. This, then, is a good illustration concerning that point. Paul couldn't go on with his

prayer until he had given these people a doctrinal foundation for their prayer. So the point is this--it is not how long we pray, but how doctrinally true is our prayer when it is offered. Praying a lot doesn't mean much unless it is based on accurate Bible doctrine. Any cluck can pray. To pray all you have to do is get caught in a jam and then cry out to God and say, "God, help me!" But that isn't effective intelligent prayer. Prayer is a vehicle and not a virtue within itself. Many people pray and make a deal with God because they want something from him. Prayer means concentration and it is very difficult work. In order to pray intelligently, we must know Bible doctrine. In this connection, remember my oft stated principle, "You cannot know the will of God unless you know the Word of God, because within the Word of God is revealed the will of God."

So verses one through thirteen compose an interruption, and Paul is actually saying something like this to us-- "Remember, before you can pray effectively, you must learn some doctrine."

One of the most important doctrines in Scripture is the doctrine of the Mystery, and this is the doctrine concerning the Church Age. This doctrine was never mentioned once in the Old Testament. Even Satan and angels didn't know about this doctrine until Christ outlined it to his disciples in the Upper Room. In that discourse Christ revealed the church age to his disciples. In order to understand "The Mystery" you have to understand Dispensations.

After Paul's great legalistic blunder in the Temple in Jerusalem, God disciplined Paul and he spent a number of years in jail as a result of that discipline. But Paul finally got to Rome, and when he did he wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. These books contain the doctrine he would have taught in Jerusalem, but they were not ready for that doctrine then, and he had to wait until he got to Rome to set forth this doctrine. You will recall that Paul wrote this letter to the Ephesians while he was a prisoner in Rome. But please notice that he did not call himself a prisoner of Nero, but calls himself a prisoner of Jesus Christ. Paul lived by the principle of Romans 8:28. Once he had gotten out of the geographical will of God, he took that terrible vow in the temple in Jerusalem, and as a result was a prisoner for more than four years. However, God turned cursing into blessing and Paul was able to use this prison experience for the glory of the Lord. Indeed Paul lived according to Philippians 4:11-12. "Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need."

#### The Doctrine Of The Mystery

The word "Mystery" is a word that refers to doctrine of a fraternity that has been kept secret from the outside world. "The Mystery" refers to the Church Age, and it actually began on the Day of Pentecost when the church began in 30 A.D. At that moment every believer became a priest, every believer was indwelt with the Holy Spirit, and with Christ, and every believer became an ambassador in full-time Christian service. Now there is not one line in the Old Testament about this doctrine, it was a mystery to them in Old Testament times. We should remember that the Old Testament talks about the



birth of Christ, about the death of Christ, about the resurrection of Christ, about the ascension of Christ, and about Christ being seated at God's right hand. Then there is not a single word in the Old Testament about the Church Age, and that is what Paul is now going to explain in Ephesians 3, and he calls it the mystery. The mystery was not revealed in Old Testament times. Even the Devil didn't know about it. Since Genesis 3:15 up through the time of the ascension of Christ, Christ had been the main target of Satan. But once Christ was ascended, the Devil could no longer touch him, so he had to start in on the line of Christ, and this is what we call "The Intensification Of The Angelic Conflict." The Devil attacked the line of Christ as long as he could. He centered his attack on David and David's line and on the virgin birth, and then on Christ all through his earthly ministry. Once Christ ascended, everything changed. Starting at that moment, every believer in the Church Age became the target of Satan and every believer entered into full-time Christian service.

Satan was so busy indwelling Judas Iscariot to get him to betray Christ that he missed the Upper Room discourse when Jesus outlined the Church Age doctrine to his disciples. So the Church Age really took Satan by surprise but he soon got full information and got cranked up and has been going full steam ahead against the Church Age believers ever since. Every believer is a direct target of Satan during the Church Age. For this reason, God had a series of doctrines for the people of the Church Age that had never been revealed before. So "Mystery Doctrine" means doctrine that was hidden from saints who lived prior to the Church Age. Every believer is a very important cog in the machinery of the body of Christ and each Christian is a very important part of the angelic conflict.

In order to understand "The Mystery" you have to understand history from the divine viewpoint. Satan is launching many strong attacks on the dispensation of the church. The Ecumenical Movement is one of these Satanic attacks. Many so called "Fundamentalists Groups" attack dispensations. Many of those groups say that just so we love everybody that that is all that is important. Many of these groups play down doctrine and they claim that doctrine is not too important. The word "Dispensations" is a dirty word to them and they claim that it isn't even a Bible term. Well, we will see this word come up in this passage, so don't be shocked when you meet this word.

In this passage we realize that Paul had become temporarily disgusted with the Jews and he wrote "On behalf of you Gentiles." So this message is addressed to Gentiles in the Roman Empire. Paul was a Jew, but he was God's messenger to the Gentile world. Here in this passage he presents the doctrine of dispensationalism.

EPHESIANS 3:2 "If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward:" This "if" is a first class condition, and it means the statement is true. It is an aorist, active, indicative of the word "Akouo" and it means that in a point of time in the past they had heard about dispensations. They heard it but they didn't understand the far-reaching implications of this doctrine. "The dispensation of the grace of God" is a technical name for the Church Age. In the Church Age every believer is a priest in his own right, and

has a right to his privacy. But every believer needs to have doctrine taught to him verse by verse.

The word "dispensation" comes from the Greek word "oikonomia" and is one of the four Greek words in the Bible used for dispensation. It means the administration of an household, the administration of an estate. It here refers to God's administration of believers so he can bless them and mature them into adult Christians. Some of the other Greek words used for dispensations are "Chronos" and this is the word from which we get our word chronology and is used to picture a sequence of events. It breaks up history in a series of events, one following after another. Another word for dispensation is "kairos" and this means taking events and breaking them up into their logical order. The other word for dispensation is "aion" and refers to a period, and era.

#### THE MEANING OF THE WORD "DISPENSATION"

1. Dispensation is a period of human history expressed in terms of divine revelation. In other words, it is history from God's viewpoint. History has an outline, and dispensations are God's outline of history.
2. A dispensation is nothing more than a divine view of historical events.
3. Dispensations also constitute the divine interpretation of history.
4. The believer must be oriented to God's way of looking at history in order to understand God's plan. Since God's plan is perfect, we need to understand that plan.
5. In every dispensation God's plan operated through a specific agency. In the first dispensation, which we call the dispensation of the Gentiles, God operated through a family, one family. In the next dispensation God operated through a nation, the nation of Israel. In the third dispensation God operates through the church. In the Millennium God will operate through Christ personally.
6. In each dispensation salvation is always the same. Salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ. Each dispensation presents additional revelation, but salvation is always the same. At first there was no written revelation, then later on God gave the written Word. When Christ was on the earth, people had both the Written Word and the Living Word.

In the Church Age the Canon of Scripture was completed. In Old Testament times they communicated the meaning of salvation through animal sacrifices, and in this way they anticipated the death of Christ on the cross. They had to see a picture of salvation for they couldn't read about it for at that time it had not been written down.

1st Dispensation "The Age Of The Gentiles." Only Gentiles lived on the earth during this dispensation.

This dispensation included the following things:

1. The era of positive volition. Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden in innocence.
2. Adam and Eve sinned and negative volition took over.
3. The flood and God's new beginning for the human race.
4. The period of the formation of nationalism and God's rejection of the first united nations.
5. In this dispensation there was one race, one language, and one way of salvation.
6. This dispensation began with Adam and closed with God scattering men over the face of the earth.
7. There was no written revelation during this period.

2nd Dispensation "The Age Of The Jews." This dispensation began with Abraham and continued down through Christ's earthly ministry. Then the Jewish nation was phased out, was set aside, and we jump clear over the Church Age and come back to the Jewish age which is completed with the Seven-year Tribulation period. So this dispensation really has three parts--

- a. The age of the patriarchs.
- b. The age of Moses to Christ.
- c. The seven-year Tribulation.

During this dispensation God used Israel as the communicating agency for his message. During this dispensation people were saved by having faith in Christ.

3rd Dispensation "The Church Age"

The age consists of the formation of the Body Of Christ. When the "Body Of Christ" is completed, the church will be raptured, and the Tribulation will begin. The Church Age is unique for many reasons. It has the following unique characteristics.

1. For the first time, there is a complete Canon of Scripture.
2. For the first time in history all believers are in union with Christ.
3. Positional sanctification. The Holy Spirit and Christ will indwell every believer in this dispensation. Christ will indwell the individual for fellowship, the Holy Spirit will indwell for power and function.
4. Every believer is a priest and represents himself before God.
5. Every believer is an ambassador for Christ.
6. Every believer is a special target for Satan and every believer is a battleground.
7. A supernatural way of life as a result of the filling of the Holy Spirit.

All of these things were brand new and had never existed before in any previous dispensation. Once the "Body Of Christ" is completed, history reverts to the Jewish Age and the Tribulation will last for seven years. At the end of the Tribulation Christ will return personally to this earth.



**4th Dispensation "The Millennium"**

This is the time when Christ will sit on the throne of David and will personally rule the earth. This is when the lion and the lamb will lie down together. This is when they will beat their swords into plowshares. There will be no poverty in the earth. Perfect environment will exist for a thousand years. History began with perfect environment in the Garden of Eden, and it will end with perfect environment in the Millennium

This is a divine outline of history, and to understand Church Age doctrine we must study this age quite carefully. This is what Paul calls "The Mystery." You must understand "The Mystery" so you can properly function as unto the Lord.

The Dispensation of the Church Age is the dispensation of grace. It is the dispensation of the Holy Spirit. It is the dispensation of the Kingdom of God. It is the dispensation of the Church. It is the dispensation of the Millennium.

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