

DISPENSATIONS: AS DISTINGUISHED FROM “AGES”

By Escape the Mustard Tree

Ask most Christians what a “dispensation” is, and you'll usually get the same answer you'd get if you asked what an “age” is — the two words get used as though they mean the same thing, “the Dispensation of Grace” and “the Church Age” treated as interchangeable labels for the same block of time. But are they the same thing? Let's look at what Scripture actually does with the word “dispensation,” because once the distinction is in view, it exposes a mistake sitting underneath one of the most commonly taught frameworks in Christendom today.

What a “Dispensation” Actually Is

“Dispensation” is the English rendering of the Greek word 'oikonomia.' A cognate form of the word is 'oikonomos,' built from two smaller words — 'oikos' (“house”) and 'nemo' (“to manage”). So 'oikonomos' has to do with the management of a house: a central person placed in charge, with others under him holding responsible positions within that house. 'Oikonomia' carries that same basic sense. In the New King James Version, the word appears seven times. Three of those comes in a single passage (Luke 16:2-4), where the word is translated “stewardship”; the other four are translated “dispensation” (1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 1:10; 3:2; Col. 1:25). Readers using a translation built on the critical Greek text (such as ESV Bible) will count nine uses, since those texts read 'oikonomia' at Ephesians 3:9 and 1 Timothy 1:4 (where the NKJV uses 'koinonia'), translated to “fellowship” and “godly edification.” The count differs; the meaning of the word does not.

Let's look at the word in its own setting before we go any further. Here is the parable that gives us the word “stewardship” in the first place —

Luke 16:1-2

“He also said to His disciples: "There was a certain rich man who had a steward ['oikonomos'], and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. So he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship ['oikonomia'], for you can no longer be steward.'”

Notice exactly what's in view: a man placed in charge of another man's goods, expected to manage them faithfully, and ultimately called to give an account of how he managed them. That is the whole of what “dispensation” means — nothing more mysterious than that.

“Stewardship” has to do with household management, and Christians are stewards in exactly this sense — members of a household, placed in charge of a portion of the Owner's goods, expected to manage those goods under the Holy Spirit's leadership in such a way that there is an increase (compare Luke 12:35-48; Matt. 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-27). So “a dispensation,” at its root, simply has to do with the management of the Lord's household affairs through those He has placed in His house as stewards. And whenever there's a change in stewardship within God's dealings with mankind, there is, correspondingly, a change in dispensation — because “stewardship” and “dispensation” are, in this respect, the very same word.

Notice what this means: “dispensation” is not simply another word for “age.” One age covers the whole of Man's Day; another age covers the Messianic Era that follows it. But within the scope of those two ages, there are more than two dispensations — because a single age can contain more than one arrangement of household management.

Now that the term is on the table, it's worth being clear about what does not change whenever a dispensation does. God Himself does not change — “I am the LORD, I do not change” (Mal. 3:6), and “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8). His character doesn't change, His holiness doesn't change, and, as we'll see, the scope of salvation doesn't change from one dispensation to the next. What changes is never God — it's the household arrangement He puts in place, the stewards through whom He administers His purposes at a given time.

What an “Age” Actually Is

The other half of that opening claim deserves the same careful treatment as “dispensation” got. The Greek word behind “age,” 'aion,' appears 126 times in the New Testament — but the King James Version renders it “age” in only two of those places (Eph. 2:7; Col. 1:26); everywhere else it's translated “world” or “forever,” which quietly erases the very distinction this study is built on. To compound the problem, a completely different Greek word, 'genea' (“generations”), gets mistranslated “ages” in two places in the King James version (Eph. 3:5, 21) — which makes it sound as though many ages pass during the present dispensation, when Scripture actually teaches the opposite: many generations, one age.

Scripture presents a deliberate, ordered sequence of ages, not an undifferentiated stretch of time (compare 1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 3:9; Heb. 1:2), moving toward and climaxing in the Messianic Era. Once that's in view, “age” stops being a vague synonym for “long stretch of time” and becomes what Scripture actually uses it as: a specific, bounded unit inside God's larger timeline — the very thing a “dispensation” operates within, but is never identical to.

Four Dispensations Within Seven Thousand Years

Scripture speaks of “ages” being deliberately structured by God from the very start —

Hebrews 11:3

“By faith we understand that the worlds [literally, ‘the ages’] were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.”

If God really did frame the ages this deliberately, the place to look for that design at work is right where His revelation to man begins. And what's there is a more specific pattern than the shorthand most people reach for — “six days of work, one day of rest.” Genesis 1:1–2:3 actually lays out four distinct movements: creation (1:1), ruin (1:2a), restoration (1:2b–25), and rest (2:1–3). The days of Genesis 1 aren't God making something from nothing over six days — they're God restoring something that had already been ruined, and then resting on the seventh day once that restoration was complete. (That reading of Genesis 1:1–2 — a creation, then a ruin, then a restoration, rather than a single act of origination — is worked out at length in Part X, pp 73–81, of *The Word of the Kingdom Bible study* on this same website. Here it is enough to notice the shape the text itself gives, and where that shape points.).

That pattern matters because the Sabbath itself was given to Israel as a sign pointing beyond itself —

Exodus 31:16–17

“Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed.”

A sign points to something beyond itself, and the pattern set in Genesis — six days of restorative work followed by a seventh day of rest — becomes the template for a second, later restoration on a far larger scale: the restoration of ruined man. Scripture reveals the scale that later restoration operates on through two connected passages in Peter. The first comes right before Peter's own statement of the day-for-a-thousand-years ratio, and it isn't incidental — it's the Transfiguration, which Matthew explicitly places “after six days” (Matt. 16:28–17:1), a small preview of the Son of Man coming in His kingdom on the seventh day. (Luke's “about eight days after these sayings” [Luke 9:28] is an inclusive count, front day and back day both included; Matthew and Mark each give the interval itself, “after six days,” Matt. 17:1 and Mark 9:2.) —

2 Peter 1:16–18

“For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honor and

glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’ And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.”

Then, a few verses later in that same letter, Peter gives the ratio itself —

2 Peter 3:8

“But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.”

Applied to the six-and-seventh-day pattern of Genesis, that ratio turns the sign into an actual span of time: six days become 6,000 years of restorative work, and the seventh day, the Sabbath, becomes a literal 1,000 years of rest — the Messianic Kingdom.

That same rest — and what's required to enter it — gets developed at far greater length in Hebrews, in a passage worth reading in full because of how precisely it ties the Sabbath rest to belief and obedience, not just to a fixed date on the calendar —

Hebrews 3:7–4:11

7 Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: 8 ‘Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness, 9 where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, and saw My works forty years. 10 Therefore I was angry with that generation, and said, “They always go astray in their heart, and they have not known My ways.” 11 So I swore in My wrath, “They shall not enter My rest.”’

12 Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; 13 but exhort one another daily, while it is called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. 14 For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, 15 while it is said: ‘Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.’ 16 For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses? 17 Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? 18 And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? 19 So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.

1 Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. 2 For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it. 3 For we who have believed do enter that rest, as He has said: ‘So I swore in My wrath, “They shall not enter My rest,”’ although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. 4 For He has spoken in a certain place of the seventh day in this way: ‘And God rested on the seventh day from all His works’; 5 and again in this place: ‘They shall not enter My rest.’

6 Since therefore it remains that some must enter it, and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience, 7 again He designates a certain day, saying in David, ‘Today,’ after such a long time, as it has been said: ‘Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.’ 8 For if Joshua had given them rest [‘katapausis’], then He would not afterward have spoken of another day. 9 There remains therefore a rest [‘sabbatismos’] for the people of God. 10 For he who has entered [‘eiselthōn’] His rest has himself also ceased [‘katapausen’] from his works as God did from His.

11 Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest [‘katapausen’], lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience.

Notice the shift the text itself makes. Ten times we see the word “rest”/“rested” in this passage, and every occurrence of “rest,” save one, is the Greek noun ‘katapausis’ or its verb form ‘katapauo’ — the ordinary word for rest or cessation. Verse 9, however, switches to a different word entirely — ‘sabbatismos,’ found nowhere else in the New Testament, a word built directly from “Sabbath,” so that it literally reads, “There remains therefore a sabbath

rest for the people of God.” This passage spends twenty-three verses building toward that one specific, climactic term: not just rest in general, but a Sabbath rest — the very 1,000-year Sabbath this study has been tracing.

Verse 10 carries its own important detail. Start with where the passage is already pointing. Everything in it faces forwards: a promise that still “remains” (v.1), a rest that some “must enter” (v.6), and a command to “be diligent to enter that rest” (v.11). A rest already entered needs no promise held open for it and no command to pursue it. The grammar of verse 10 fits that exactly. Both of its verbs — “entered” (‘eiselthon’) and “ceased” (‘katepausen’) — are aorist in the Greek, and English translations default to rendering the aorist as a completed past action. But the aorist can also carry a timeless, general sense, describing what is true of anyone who does a given thing, whenever they do it — closer to “the one who enters... ceases” than “the one who has entered... has ceased.” The tense allows that reading; the passage requires it. Verse 10 isn’t describing someone who has already entered God’s rest at some point in the past; it’s describing what will be true of whoever enters it — entered through faithful obedience, not through the mere passage of time. Nobody reading this has entered the Sabbath rest yet. It’s still ahead.

Revelation brings the matter to its own conclusion, naming that thousand-year era six times in a single chapter, immediately before the eternal ages that follow in the chapters after it —

Revelation 20:2-7

“He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while. And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years. Now when the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison.”

Six thousand years of restorative work, one thousand years of rest — that ratio, drawn out from Genesis by Peter, is the framework Scripture is built on throughout.

Within that 7,000-year span, there are four distinct dispensations: a present dispensation, in which God deals with Christians; two past dispensations, one in which God dealt with Israel, and another before that in which He dealt with mankind at large, and a future dispensation — the Messianic Kingdom itself.

(It is worth noting that there may be a dispensation of sorts on either side of the 7,000 years as well — Satan ruled the earth before Adam’s creation, apparently within some kind of stewardship he was given and then rebelled against (compare Ezek. 28:12-17; Isa. 14:12-14); and on the far side of the 7,000 years, man himself will apparently occupy positions of responsibility within God’s government of the universe (compare 1 Cor. 6:2-3; Rev. 22:5). But Scripture speaks of the time before and after the 7,000 years only enough to help us understand the 7,000 years themselves, not to satisfy curiosity about what lies outside them. To press further than that is doing little more than surmising.)

The chart below may help make this easier to hold together — notice how the 6,000 years of restorative work is itself “one age” containing three separate dispensations (Individuals, Israel, and the Church), while the 1,000-year Kingdom that follows is a second, distinct age. That’s the very distinction this study opened with: an age can, and here does, contain more than one dispensation within it.

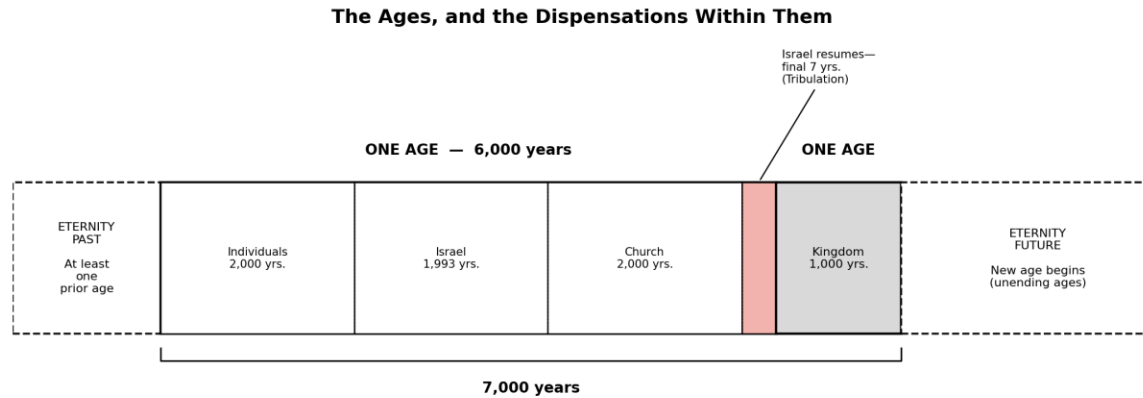


Figure 1 — The Ages, and the Dispensations Within Them

And it really is only two ages within this 7,000-year span. Christ Himself draws that exact boundary line —

Matthew 12:32

“Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.”

“This age” and “the age to come” — two ages, named side by side, with nothing squeezed in between them. And “this age,” the one Christ and His hearers were living in at the time, reaches back much further than His own ministry. The same underlying Greek word, still rendered “world” rather than “age” in these particular verses, appears in each of the following, all pointing to the same starting line — “Who have been since the world [‘age’] began” (Luke 1:70); “Since the world [‘age’] began it has been unheard of” (John 9:32); “since the world [‘age’] began” (Acts 3:21). Put together, these place the start of “this age” back at the beginning of the present restoration itself — not at Bethlehem, not at Pentecost. So the entire 6,000 years traced in the chart, from Adam through the Tribulation, is a single age; the 1,000-year Kingdom that follows is the second, climactic age; and beyond that, Scripture describes an unending sequence of further ages still to come (compare Eph. 2:7, “ages to come”; 3:21 & Rev. 1:6, literally “unto the ages of the ages”) — which is exactly what the chart’s right-hand box is pointing to.

The Popular View — And Why It Falls Short

When most Christians hear “dispensations,” what they’ve usually been handed is the scheme laid out in the footnotes of The Scofield Reference Bible — seven dispensations, taught in Bible colleges and seminaries as though it were Scripture’s own framework: Innocence, from creation to the fall; Conscience, from the fall to the Flood; Human Government, from the Flood to the call of Abraham; Promise, from Abraham to the giving of the Law; Law, from Sinai to Calvary; Grace, from Calvary to the Kingdom; and Kingdom, the thousand-year Messianic Era.

But this scheme rests on a faulty starting point. Scofield defines a dispensation as “a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God” — and in commenting on “the dispensation of the fulness of times” in Eph. 1:10, the original 1917 edition goes further, calling this “the seventh and last of the ordered ages which condition human life on the earth.” Here’s the verse itself —

Ephesians 1:10

“That in the dispensation of the fulness of times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in Him.”

Read that Scofield quote carefully: “dispensation” and “age” are being treated as the same word, the seven dispensations presented as seven ages. That's the same conflation we've already seen Scripture doesn't make — the verse itself says nothing about “ages” at all; it's simply describing the household arrangement under which God will finally gather everything together in Christ. And it's very likely the single point from which most of the present confusion over both words traces back — footnotes, not Scripture itself, setting the mold for how dispensational thought gets taught in Christendom today.

It's also very likely why the present dispensation gets called, more often than not, “the Church Age” by Christians who've never questioned where that label came from. But there's no such thing as “the Church Age,” and not just because it blurs “age” and “dispensation” together. The present age began long before the Church existed — as this study has already shown, it stretches back to the very beginning of the present restoration — and it will continue for at least seven more years after the Church is removed from the earth, the seven years comprising the Tribulation still owed to Israel's dispensation. An age that starts before the Church and outlasts it can't be named after the Church. What's properly called “the dispensation of the grace of God” (Eph. 3:2) is only ever a part of the present age, never the whole of it.

This distinction matters for more than terminology. If a dispensation really is a stewardship arrangement rather than a different way of testing man's obedience, then it was never the case that people living “under the Law” were saved one way and people living “under Grace” are saved another. The ground of salvation has never changed — the substitutionary provision pictured from the very beginning in the coats of skin God made for Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:21), carried forward through the sacrificial system (Heb. 9:22), and fulfilled once for all in Christ (Heb. 10:1-14), has always been the basis of redemption, in every dispensation — reaching back to a Lamb “slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8). What changes, dispensation to dispensation, is the household arrangement: who God has placed in charge, what stewardship has been entrusted to them, and what they'll be held accountable for managing. Treating “Law” and “Grace” as though they name two different roads to salvation, rather than two different stewardship arrangements, is exactly the kind of error that follows once “dispensation” and “age” get collapsed into one word.

The Divisions Scripture Itself Provides

So what does Scripture actually give us? Paul answers the question directly, dividing all mankind into three groups

1 Corinthians 10:32

“Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God.”

“Greeks” here is Paul's own shorthand for the Gentile nations generally, the same way he uses it elsewhere (compare Rom. 1:16; 10:12; see also the KJV wording of the above verse). Jews, Gentiles, and the church of God: these three divisions, dealt with separately during Man's Day and together during the coming Messianic Era, establish the only dispensational scheme Scripture itself provides.

God deals with mankind in cycles of time — 7-year, 70-year, 400 and 430 years, and 490-year cycles specifically with Israel (Ex. 31:13-17; Jer. 25:11-12; Gen. 15:13; Ex. 12:40-41; Gal. 3:17; Dan. 9:2, 24-27) — and these smaller cycles sit inside a larger 2,000-year cycle. There are three such 2,000-year cycles across the whole of Man's Day, one for each of Paul's three divisions, followed by a final thousand-year cycle in which God deals with all three groups together at once.

The first 2,000 years covers God's dealings with mankind at large — what would later be called the Gentiles, though in the strict sense there was no such thing as a “Gentile” yet. A Gentile in Scripture is simply someone who is not a Jew (or, once the expression is available, not “in Christ” either — Gal. 3:28), and that category couldn't exist until the separate line through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob existed to be distinguished from.

Scripture doesn't leave this earliest period ungoverned, even though it has no formal code like the one given at Sinai. God dealt with these first two thousand years directly, individual to individual, rather than through a national law: a specific command to Adam (Gen. 2:16-17), and, after the Flood, the first stated principle of human government anywhere in Scripture — “Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed” (Gen. 9:6) — part of the covenant God made with Noah and his sons (Gen. 9:1-17). Notice that this was a genuinely new delegation, not a restatement of something already in place: when Cain killed Abel, God reserved judgment to Himself and explicitly protected Cain from vigilante justice (Gen. 4:15), and Lamech's boast of taking vengeance into his own hands (Gen. 4:23-24) reads as a mark of the era's lawlessness, not a sanctioned practice. No one had the authority to execute judgment on God's behalf until Genesis 9:6 gave it. Paul describes exactly this arrangement centuries later, looking back on it from the other side of Sinai —

Romans 2:14-15

“For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them.”

Conscience and direct address, not a code — that's the substance of the “Individuals” dispensation, and it's also why this period doesn't divide neatly into the several named stages (“Innocence,” “Conscience,” “Human Government”) Scofield's scheme proposes. Scripture treats mankind at large, from Adam to Abraham, as a single stewardship arrangement, not three, even though the specific expectations God laid on man clearly developed as the period went on (compare the added *permission to eat meat* and the added *prohibition on murder* in Gen. 9:1-6 with what had come before). One steward, one dispensation — not a fixed code, but a real accountability nonetheless, and exactly the kind of arrangement 'oikonomia' was shown at the outset of this study to describe.

The second 2,000 years covers God's dealings with the Jews — from the call of Abraham (who was first called a “Hebrew” [Gen. 14:13], not a “Jew,” a title that comes later, from Judah) to Calvary, with seven years of this cycle still remaining. Those seven years are the unfulfilled Seventieth Week of Daniel's prophecy, and it's worth reading in full—

Daniel 9:24-27

“Seventy weeks [‘shavu’im,’ literally ‘sevens’] are determined for your people and for your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sins, to make reconciliation for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the Most Holy. Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince, there shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublesome times. And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself; and the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end of it shall be with a flood, and till the end of the war desolations are determined. Then he shall confirm a covenant with many for one week [‘shavua,’ one ‘seven’]; but in the middle of the week he shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall be one who makes desolate, even until the consummation, which is determined, is poured out on the desolate.”

Most readers miss what's actually being counted here, because “weeks” in English suggests seven-day units. The Hebrew word is ‘shavu’im,’ literally “sevens” — units of seven, not specifically seven days, and the context (a prophecy measured in years, not weeks) makes clear these are sevens of years. That's where the math comes from: seventy sevens of years is 490 years, and sixty-nine of those seventy “sevens” — 483 years — were fulfilled by the time Messiah was “cut off,” exactly as prophesied. One “seven” remains: seven years, still future, comprising the coming Tribulation. Daniel's seventy sevens are one of the smaller cycles noted earlier, running inside Israel's larger 2,000-year cycle rather than alongside it — and both stopped at the same moment. When Messiah was cut off, the count on the smaller cycle halted with seven years unspent, and Israel's dispensation was set aside with those same seven years unspent. The last seven owed on the 490 and the last seven owed on the 2,000 are not two debts but one,

and they will be paid at the same time. The third 2,000 years covers God's dealings with Christians, beginning at Pentecost, fifty days after Christ's resurrection (Lev. 23:15-16; Acts 2:1), and running up to the beginning of the same Tribulation that closes out Israel's cycle. And this is worth paying attention to: we are living very near the end of this present 2,000-year period, which places Jew, Gentile, and Christian alike very near the end of the entire triad of 2,000-year cycles.

The Church's own removal from the earth — the rapture and resurrection of the saints (1 Thess. 4:13-18; 1 Cor. 15:51-52) — is what brings this third 2,000-year period to its close and opens the way for the final seven years to run their course. Scripture has its own name for that seven-year period, and it isn't a churchly one: “the time of Jacob's trouble” (Jer. 30:7). That's a deliberate designation, not an incidental one. Those seven years complete Israel's unfinished cycle — the last “seven” still owed her from Daniel's prophecy — and they belong to her dispensation, not the Church's; the Church, having been removed, has no part to play in them.

Then, and only then — once all three 2,000-year cycles are complete — will God deal with all three divisions of mankind together, at the same time, for the thousand years that complete the full 7,000: the Messianic Kingdom, the Sabbath rest foreshadowed from the very beginning by the seventh day in Genesis.

Hebrews 1:2

“...has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds [literally, ‘the ages’].”

Put simply, the whole of Scripture divides itself into four periods: Adam to Abraham (2,000 years); Abraham to Calvary, plus the future seven-year Tribulation (2,000 years); Pentecost to the Tribulation (2,000 years); and the thousand years toward which everything has been moving since God “made the [ages].” The chart below lays this same timeline out visually, alongside the six-and-seventh-day pattern it's built on —

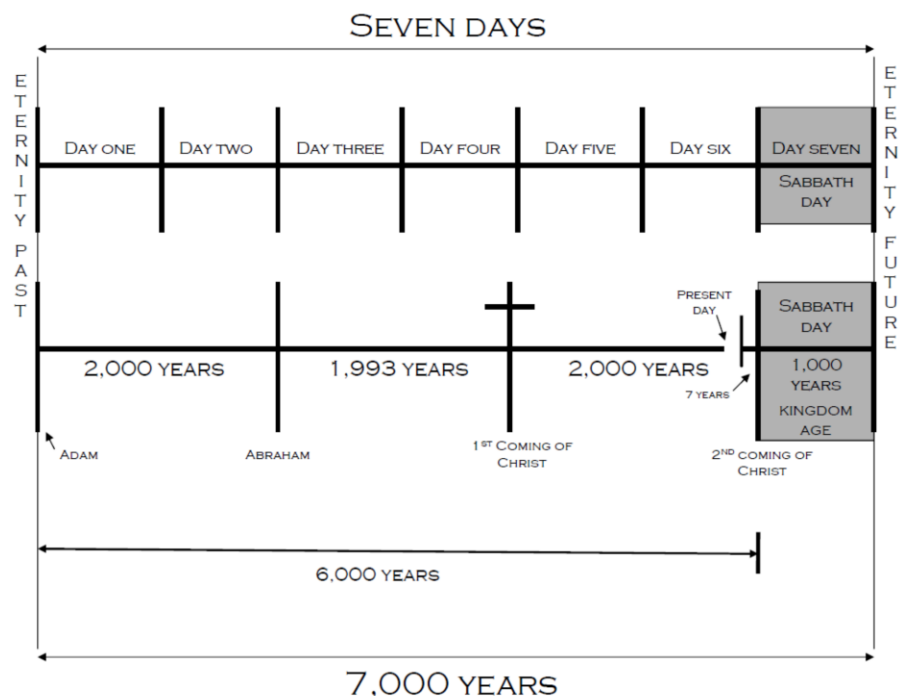


Figure 2 — The Seven Days and the Seven Thousand Years

What This Means for Us

None of this is merely academic. If “dispensation” really does mean stewardship — household management — then to live in the present dispensation is to live as a steward of the Owner's goods, under obligation to manage what's been entrusted so that there is an increase (compare Matt. 25:14ff). And if we really are living near the end of the present 2,000-year cycle, near the end of the whole triad of cycles that make up Man's Day, then the question every Christian steward has to reckon with isn't an abstract one about labels and timelines.

It also settles a question readers run into constantly: which promises belong to whom. Commands and promises given to Israel under her dispensation don't automatically transfer to the Church under this one, and the Church's promises don't reach backward onto Israel either — not because God changed His mind about either group, but because He is administering His purposes through them differently, at different times, for different ends. Keep the stewards straight, and the rest of Scripture stops looking like a collection of contradictions and starts looking like what it is: one purpose, carried out through a series of different administrations.

Even the way this whole story has been told is itself an illustration of the pattern it describes. God's revelation across these dispensations arrives exactly the way Hebrews describes it — “at various times and in various ways” (Heb. 1:1), literally “in many portions and in many ways” — a single command to Adam, a law code for Israel, a once-hidden mystery unveiled to the Church (Eph. 3:5; Rom. 16:25-26), each dispensation disclosing more than the one before it. That's not incidental to the subject of this study; it's the same “milk to meat” pattern Scripture describes in individual believers (Heb. 5:12-14; 1 Cor. 3:1-2) playing out across the whole of Man's Day. A child does not yet manage the estate he will one day possess, “though he is master of all” (Gal. 4:1) — and neither, it seems, has mankind, not yet. Every dispensation this study has traced has been leading somewhere: toward a kingdom in which the partial finally gives way to the whole (1 Cor. 13:9-10), the completed disclosure Isaiah pictures when he says “the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:9).

That coming Sabbath rest is not a metaphor, either — and the passage in Hebrews doesn't stop at description. It closes with a command —

Hebrews 4:11

“Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience.”

Scripture doesn't leave that accounting to guesswork, either. It's the stewards of this same present dispensation who will stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Cor. 3:11-15) to have their management of the Owner's goods evaluated — not for salvation, which was never in question, but for reward: whether the trust extended to them in this dispensation was managed well enough to be entrusted with a share in the dispensation still to come, the Messianic Kingdom itself. That's the question that's been running underneath this whole present dispensation from the start:

When the Owner returns and asks for an accounting, what will He find?