

The Dispensation of the Fulness of Times

Let us turn to our Bibles to Ephesians chapter 1. Ephesians chapter 1 verse 10. This is an interesting verse, especially with the turn of phrase used here in a specific word.

So I will have this sermon on the matter of the return of Christ, the fullness of time, and then the next sermon will be on the dispensations or the economy and the working of God in history of the church. Ephesians 1.10, let us listen attentively to the word of God. This is speaking of God who has purposed in himself that in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth in him.

Let us pray. Here in Lord God, we read in this great doxology, another wonderful gospel truth of the dispensation of the fullness of time that is in the future when Christ returns and all things will be gathered to him of that is of the church and that there will be the great white throne of judgment and the end of the age, the beginning of the new heavens and the new earth. We long for such a day, God almighty.

We have the down payment of the Holy Spirit, verse 13 and 14 is a guarantee of our inheritance. We rest in that hope and promise, Lord, that you will return and that we will be brought with you to a better world, a better reality as it were with a new body that no longer tastes death nor sin. Come quickly, Lord Jesus, we pray. Amen.

This interesting verse is a tightly woven teaching of the end of the age of all time when the world is remade into the new heaven and the new earth. Of course, it will be a time of wonder and awe, terrifying yet hopeful.

It is a great day of judgment, the day of the white throne of Christ. Daniel describes Jesus throne this way in the Old Testament, Daniel chapter seven, verse nine. I watched till thrones were put in place and the ancient of days was seated.

His garment was white as snow and the hair of his head was like pure wool. His throne was a fiery flame, its wheels a burning fire, a fiery stream issued and came forth from before him. A thousand thousands ministered to him.

10,000 times 10,000 stood before him. And that's just a glimpse of what Daniel saw of the then current throne of great God of heaven and earth. In the book of John, the end of the Bible, his apostles, the apostles vision here in revelation, we have in chapter 20, verse 11.

Then I saw a great white throne and him who sat on it from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. Jesus thrown the picture here of the end of the age and the beginning of the new dispensation of the new heaven and the earth.

And these intense scenes are given to make us sober minded and alert for the future. Paul is writing about the same thing, but from a different and historical perspective or a different purpose, one of encouragement and of hope, part of this doxology of praise to God. So let us look here in these two parts, the key part of this verse 10 and the dispensation of the fullness of times dispensation.

The Dispensation

You've heard that word before. Some of you may have been raised or been around dispensationalists they're called, uh, that came out in the mid to late 1800s and grew in popularity in the early 1900s. As liberalism was taking over the mainline churches, that is the big name churches like the Methodists, uh, even the Baptist, the Presbyterians and the Anglicans.

And they were denying that as the liberals of the day or the progressives, they were called actually at the turn of last, last century, late 1800s, early 1900s, denying the, the Bible's veracity, denying miracles, the deity of Christ, all this was going on. And so part of the response to that is they found somebody who seemed to take the Bible seriously, the dispensationalists. And in many ways they did to be sure, but in other ways they were very, very confused.

And they taught initially different ways of being saved at each different dispensation or way of doing things in history. So Adam had a different way. And during the, before Abraham, they had a different way and Noahic and et cetera.

Moses, of course, was, you were saved by obeying God's law and the like. Typically they had seven dispensations. And so the word has come upon us, I think, in hard times.

We don't like using the word dispensation perhaps in our circles. And I can understand that, but here it is in the Bible. And it just simply means household economy.

There's nothing more complicated than that. It means household economy. You could translate it that way.

But of course it isn't because it isn't a household in the strictest sense of, you know, the extended family or the nuclear family. Historically, many of them, they, they did the work at home. You had your own farm, you took care of the animals, or you were a carpenter.

Perhaps it was all done in the house or at least near the house in its own little place in the backyard or something like that. Right? That's the idea. And it's God's, of course, economy as the Puritan Trapp wrote in his commentary, his commentary in the Bible, God is the best economic.

His house is exactly ordered for matter of good husbandry. That's the idea here. It's God directing church and history in his own way through providence, specifically for the church and for her good and for his glory.

And so there are various dispensations from this understanding of God's working out things in history. The largest division, of course, is Old Testament dispensation versus New Testament dispensation, hence the division in the Bible. It doesn't mean different ways of being saved.

It means different ways in which God administers the covenant of grace for his people. He administers the covenant of grace. Specifically, I think the best way of looking at this is with respect to sanctification.

Justification is the same. They have to believe in the Messiah to come. We believe in the Messiah who has already come.

It's just a difference of time. It's the same work. It's being declared righteous by and through the instrument of faith alone.

Sanctification is a little more complicated insofar as God uses outward means to help the inward man. And those outward means have changed over time, haven't they? Abraham gave what is known as the Olah, it's right from the Hebrew, the whole burnt offering to God. But then Moses comes along and gave all these other sacrifices that Abraham never did, showing you already that they were not intrinsic to the act of worship as such, but were what? Built upon his mere good pleasure.

We made that distinction between natural law and natural worship, and that which is built merely and only upon his good pleasure that can change, and it does. Because their adjuncts are added to that which is natural, that what God built into creation, to assist us in some way, often with respect to worship. So we typically think of the ceremonial system, right? That's positive law.

That has changed. That's part of the dispensation of the way God administers sanctification, or in this case, outward forms of worship to help the people of old. They had all kinds of ways of understanding the work of Christ.

It was all symbolic, as we know. The teaching tool, Galatians 4. But there were other things as well. The kingship of David, although it's practical and functional, and everyone else had kings back then, and God used it as another layer to teach Jesus is also king, that he's going to be a great king to come.

And so you have what? The Davidic covenants, as it were, a subset to the covenant of grace to show forth externally all the more the great grandeur of Jesus and his rule for his people. So they have these functions, and they go away, of course. We don't need kings anymore.

You may have a king. It could be a natural law argument that these people prefer a king, and in fact, England has it, and they still kind of have this king, and it works for them. And that's fine.

That's another question altogether. God, however, used these things for a specific purpose, and now he's done with that purpose, although we may still use these things like kingship, for example, for other ends. And so the priesthood is done.

The kingly line is done. That's the dispensation. That's God's household economy in which he distributes things for the kids differently than he does for adults.

We do this in our home, don't we? We treat infants different than we treat young kids, different than we treat teenagers, different than we treat a full-grown adult who hasn't been able to leave the house for whatever reason. He has the greatest amount of freedom, right? Although it's still slightly curbed because mom and dad still have to go to bed before 11 o'clock, for example. It's the same thing in history with respect to the church.

There's growth, both individually and especially collectively. And so God has this economy or household working out for his kingdom. I mean, Hebrews uses that language.

There's one household. Christ is Lord over it, and what? Moses was a servant in it. Hebrews 4. That's the metaphor used.

That's why this word here. So it means nothing about that they are sanctified differently internally, right? It's the same ten commandments before the fall and after the fall. And all the dispensations are the working out externally of God's covenant of grace in particular.

It's all the same ten commandments, but all these other things are a little different. Kingship's gone, the ceremonial is gone, and the like. That's what's being referred to here, but with respect to the future, that in the dispensation or the administration of God's kingdom of the fullness of the times, right? The future, the fullness of the times when it's all going to be done, and we are what? Gathered together in one thing in Christ, in the body of Christ, and it's going to be done publicly and visibly as we will see.

Of the Fulness of Times

This is the final dispensation. This is the final dispensation, the pivot point. When Christ returns and everything before now, the New Testament will now be kind of like the Old Testament, done away with in respect to how things are done in the new heavens and new earth.

A fulfillment is perhaps a better way of describing it. A fulfillment in the new heavens and the new earth, because that's promised to us. There is a great final dispensation or administration.

Revelation 21.1. Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth have passed away. Also there was no more sea. And then I, John, saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

That's a picture of the fullness of times and the full dispensation of the fullness of times that we are gathered together in the holy Jerusalem, which is what? Another picture of the body of Christ, of the kingdom of God, saying the same idea differently. To gather together in one all things. This is how we know it's the future dispensation and not the current.

It's going to be the pivot from the New Testament era to the new heaven and the earth, the future, the glorious future, because it's that he might gather is the purpose here of this new dispensation. Together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth. Which is to say the final public revelation of the body of Christ before the whole world, those in heaven and those on earth who are saved will be now visibly united in the great resurrection.

Right now, it's not clear to the world in one sense. We make claims of being the chosen of God, and we are. We've been baptized, but the world's like, whatever.

They deceive themselves. They don't want to believe it. They're deceived by the devil.

There's no more deception here. It's going to be clearly revealed to the whole world who are his and who are not his, right? The goats in the left hand and the sheep separated to the right. This is a public display before the whole world gathered together here specifically the church so that we will see those in heaven and they will see us on earth as it were together in the final resurrection.

They will have a new body. We will have a new body. We'll be gathered before our Lord and Savior before the whole world.

This is the final dispensation of the fullness of times. And this is known as the fullness of times of the reign of Christ finished and brought into the new heavens and new earth, the end of the ages, however we wish to describe it, the great day of judgment. That's what he's referring to here.

And there's a passage that's helpful from Paul who also wrote Ephesians. And he says a little more in this passage in I Corinthians 15, I Corinthians 15, verses 20 and following. We have Paul unpacking this teaching of this end of the age or the fullness of times, specifically in verses 23 to 24, we read, but each one in his own order, Christ of firstfruits afterwards, those who are Christ that is coming, then comes the end when he delivers the kingdom of God, a kingdom to God, the father, when he puts an end to all rule and all authority in power.

In that chapter, as you may recall, Paul was explaining to them that there is a resurrection of the body contrary to what you've been told. You've been told wrong. And he explains some of this and he explains it's not just for Christ's resurrection, but our resurrection as well.

So he makes this broad statement in verse 23, each one in his own order that his will be resurrected, but first Christ, the firstfruits. And after those who are Christ at his coming will have the resurrection. And then comes the end, right? The fullness of the times in which he delivers that is Christ, the God, man, the kingdom to God, the father.

And he puts it in to all the rule and authority and power. So this is describing here a theological order back to the original assertion here in verse 23. Christ is the firstfruits and then is an order of redemption.

And the public office of Christ therefore means that he is going to do this first and he does it for us as our public head as the Adam. And then comes his return and the end of history. When afterward, those who are, verse 23, Christ at his coming will be raised as well.

Then comes the end. Then comes the end simultaneously. That's why I say it's a theological description of order, not of time, because the resurrection is the end of the age and the great white throne of judgment will be there as well.

Everything coming together at once. When you describe these things, you speak of them, of course, in sequence. That's how we have to speak by time.

Christ the first fruit, of course, Matthew Henry gives a nice little perspective on this language here. Quote, Christ's resurrection is a pledge, an earnest of ours, if we are true believers in him. Because he is risen, we shall rise.

We are part of the consecrated lump and shall partake of the acceptance and favor vouchsafed the first fruits. As adopted, of course, we have that language of vowsafed or granted to us as first fruits. Christ is a picture and a reminder and a reality for us that he has been raised from the dead.

So we too shall be raised from the dead bodily. Afterwards, verse 23 and 24, I Corinthians 15. Afterward, those who are Christ, afterward what? After his resurrection, we should be resurrected.

Not immediately. It hasn't happened yet. It's going to happen.

He's just talking about a great span of time jumping forward here. I Thessalonians 4.14, we read, for if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with him those who sleep in Jesus. So he teaches it again elsewhere.

Those who sleep with him in Jesus, we use the metaphor of sleep to highlight the fact that it's temporary. This separation of body and soul is temporary and there will be a great general resurrection of all. Even those unbelievers will have a body and they'll be judged in their body and their soul.

And of course, the dead believers, all of us would be gathered together into heaven. Then comes the end we have in verse 24 of I Corinthians 15. The end of history, the beginning of a new history, of a new heaven and a new earth.

And Christ brings the kingdom, the kingdom of grace now becomes the kingdom of glory. Remember the mediatorial kingdom of Christ is a threefold division, the kingdom of power, where he rules over the whole world now and all the kingdoms as the God man for the good of the church. I Corinthians 1, we'll get to that.

And then we are in the kingdom of grace right now. It's specifically an internal kingdom, right? The kingdom of God is among you and within you. It's of the heart and our relationship to God Almighty by the power of the spirit.

And the kingdom of glory is when it's consummated and we are in a new heaven, a new earth and have a new body. No more gathering of the elect. All the elect are now gathered.

It's the end of all. And so the people of God are brought to God, the father and the powers that rebelled will end. And he puts an end to all rule and all authority and all power, all the earthly rule and power and authority, all the Caesars, all the Pharaohs, all the presidents who have not repented will be judged and all their nations and other powers will be taken away.

And Christ will rule visibly and clearly before the world. What the dispensationalists of old taught, I say of old, they're only been around 120 years or so, is that Jesus will have a visible reign for a thousand years in Jerusalem and is going to rebuild the temple and you're going to have re-sacrifices before God. It's really something.

It's like, did the book of Hebrews ever been written in this group? You guys read the book of Hebrews? They got it wrong. It's the new heaven and the earth in which he will visibly reign, but there's not going to be a temple anymore for he is the temple. And there's not going to be sacrifices anymore.

We don't need to do any of that. Any more than we do now. That's the end of all things and the beginning of a great and beautiful future.

All the powers will be removed and he will be the only power because right now he rules through them. When we talk of Christ's mediatorial kingdom of power, we're describing him as the God man, not just the son of God, who obviously rules always in his natural condition as God, but now something different. He is also man and he rules over the Pharaohs, over the presidents, over the Caesars for the good of the church.

That's going to be done away with as well, obviously, because they're going to all be all going to be gone. So he puts an end, puts an end to all these and shuts them down and they will be at the feet of Jesus as his footstool. To put all things under him, it reads there in verses 27 and 28 of I Corinthians 15, hearkening to Psalm 8, 6, as well as Revelation 11, 15.

In Revelation 11, 15, we have, then the seventh angel sounded and there was a loud voice in heaven saying, the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever. Not as though it was never under his rule, but now it's a visible and clear rule and brought unto him and he brings them to God. And all things will be in subjection to him.

I Corinthians 15, 28. So 25, for he must reign until he put all enemies under his feet. This is ongoing occurrence.

The last enemy that will be destroyed is death for he has put all things under his feet, that's Psalm 8. But when he says all things are put on his feet is evident that he who put all things under him is accepted. Now, when he, all things are made subject to him, then the son himself will also be subject to him who put all things under him, that God may be all in all. That is the subjection of the son of God here, the son of man, the son himself is the subject of him as man in particular, because he's one divine person in two natures, God and man.

And at times we speak, the Bible speaks of him as God. Other times it speaks of him as man. And, and even in the same verse, sometimes it goes back and forth.

And here clearly the son of God, that is divine son of God is not subjected to the father as mere man, but as man he is. As Henry describes it, as man, all his authority must be delegated. And though his mediation supposes his divine nature, yet as mediator, he does not so explicitly sustain the character of God, but a middle person between God and man partaking of both natures, human and divine, as he was to reconcile both parties, God and man and receiving commission and authority from God, the father to act in this office.

And so the, his office here then will be finished because redemption will be finished. And it's a new heaven and new earth. God will be all in all the glory and majesty will be complete.

Redemption would be finished. And all of this is another way of describing the first Corinthians 15, what we saw, what we read here, the fullness of time. And we have then the last chapter, chapter 32 of the Westminster confession of faith on the last things, which is another way of describing a more fancy word, eschatology, the doctrine of the last things.

Paragraph one of the last chapter of the Westminster confession of faith. God has appointed a day where, when he will judge the world in righteousness by Jesus Christ to whom all power and judgment is given of the father in which day, not only the apostate angels shall be judged, but likewise, all persons that have lived upon earth shall appear before the tribunal of Christ to give an account of their thoughts, words, and deeds and receive according to what they have done in the body, whether good or evil. It's a final day of judgment.

Acts 17:31, amongst many verses, Acts 17:31, because he has appointed the day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he has ordained. So there he's emphasizing the mediator as man, although he's also God. He has given assurance of this to all by raising him from the dead.

The second Adam raised from the dead. It's a public act of the resurrection of Christ, and so the judgment will be the appointed day in which he will judge the world in righteousness. It will be a universal judgment.

It's the entirety of all moral creatures on earth, and it will be the final judgment. There will not be another one, not a second chance. This is the end for anybody and all.

And it's whom? Because he has appointed the day in which he will judge the world by the man whom he has ordained, that is Jesus Christ. We know it's because we read the next sentence, he has given assurance of this fact by raising him from the dead. Who did he raise from the dead? Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the anointed one for his people.

Although not popular, people want to hear of Jesus as the savior, as the redeemer, as the one who makes everything wonderful for them. And that's good and proper in its place. But he's also a king, and therefore what? A judge.

King and judge are overlapping together in the Bible in ancient nearest thinking. John 5:22, it continues here at the end of verse 27. I'll read 22 and 27.

This is Jesus speaking, the one who gave us the greatest explanation of the gospel in his words and in his life there in the written gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and here John. John 5:22, for the father judges no one but has committed all judgment to the son.

So it's God judging the world through the son by the spirit. Remember we went over the economic trinity and a simple way of describing it was from the father through the son and by the spirit and all their works. Verse 27, and has given him, that is the son, authority to execute judgment also because he is the son of man.

The savior is also the judge because he is the king. The angels are judged as well. We don't typically have a problem with this or think much about it, but it's there in the Bible.

Jude chapter, well, Jude 6, Jude 1.6, and the angels who did not keep their proper domain but left their own abode, he has reserved an everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day. So there it is again. There's a great day and we will be judged as well as angels.

And it's everyone. Second Corinthians 5.10 makes it clear as well. Second Corinthians 5.10, for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ that each one may receive the things done in his body according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

Ecclesiastes 12.14. So it's an Old Testament teaching as well. It's a natural law teaching in fact, that without the Bible, men know there's a day of judgment. Ephesians, again, Romans 1.18, there's a God, he judges.

Judgment isn't final yet, therefore it must be future. Ecclesiastes 12.14, for God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil. He knows the thoughts in the hearts of men.

We do not. Our judgment is always provisional. It's not only temporary, but often it's full and riddled with error because we do not know the hearts of men, including our children.

As parents, we make judgment calls. But I say unto you that every idle word men may speak, they will be given account in the day of judgments. We read elsewhere.

Now the judgment of God is not symmetrical in the great day of judgment. What do I mean by that? That is, Christians are judged in Christ. Unbelievers are judged outside of Christ.

And that's all the difference in the world. You either have Christ in the day, that great day, or you do not have Christ. And without Christ, the judgment is guaranteed to be condemnation.

But with Christ, that judgment is guaranteed to be without condemnation. In fact, declared righteous in him and declared before the whole world, everyone will see and know that we are his. And so Christ is our judge, but he is also, as we read in Hebrews, our elder brother and God, our father.

And that's a different kind of judgment, isn't it? Fathers judge their children. You can use the word, nothing wrong with it, but they judge the context of father and child, of compassion, of understanding. Because in our case, with the great white throne of judgment, the perfection of the law and its judgment, condemnation is instead upon Christ, instead of us.

And we will have relative growth and maturity over time as believers in our sanctification, and that will be up for display the great day of judgment. It's like, I suppose, becoming 18 and our parents are like, are you mature enough to leave the house? Have you given evidence over these 18 years that you know what to do and you can live off on your own kind of a thing? There's a judgment there, and they're worried, of course, often, because by law, you can't really stop your kids. Sometimes it's unfortunate when they're 18, they just run off and go off in their own places.

And we're kind of worried about that. We make a judgment call. That's why we're worried sometimes.

Are they really going to do it? It's somewhat something like that. So there's a familial relationship. And of course, we are never perfected in our sanctification until heaven.

And God knows this. The purpose of the fullness of times. Why the final day? It's kind of interesting.

This is paragraph two of the chapter on judgment and confession. The end of God's appointing this day is for the manifestation of the glory of his mercy in the eternal salvation of the elect and of his justice in the damnation of the reprobate who are wicked and disobedient. For then shall the righteous go into everlasting life and receive that fullness of joy and refreshing which shall come from the presence of the Lord.

The manifestation of the wrath and mercy of God, Romans 9.22 and following Romans 9.22 and following give to us both reasons for God bringing this judgment. What if God wanted to show his wrath and to make his power known endured with much long suffering, the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that he may make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had prepared beforehand for glory. Vessels of wrath, vessels of mercy, both describing the end and the purpose of why there is a final judgment so that we would understand and praise God for his wrath, wrath in the judicial sense, not in a petty sense of anger.

When you guys get angry with one another, your kids are wrathful with one another, because someone bumped them on the head. That's not what it's describing here, kids. It's a judicial, righteous indignation, as you would be if someone took your best friend, your sibling, and tortured them and murdered them.

You would be rightfully angry. This is the wrath of our God. Again, it's a day of public days of public days, and no one can hide the truth, and everyone will see who is damned and who is saved.

It's justice upon the hardened rebels, 2 Thessalonians 1, 7 and following, and here we have a very potent description of God's justice. Our wrath is a way of describing justice here. And to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, taking vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power. Paul offers this to the Thessalonians as comfort for what? Those who have troubled hearts, verse 7, because they know the enemies of the church hate them and hate us and hate the church. God in Christ is our Lord and deliverer and shall return in the fullness of time when God's plans, all his plans of redemption are finalized and fulfilled and consummated, the return of Jesus Christ.

And we shall, every one of us, be with him in incomprehensible glory forever as those in heaven and those on earth, the church militant and the church at rest are brought together. As we read a picture here in Revelation 21, verse 3, and I heard a loud voice from heaven

saying, behold, the tabernacle of God is with men and he will dwell with them and they shall be his people. God himself will be with them and be their God.

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There shall be no more death nor sorrow nor crying. There shall be no more pain for the former things have passed away.

And then he sat on the throne and said, behold, I make all things new. Maranatha, come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Let us pray. Indeed, give us the strength to persevere. May this teaching here and these verses encourage us to look forward to that day that will come in your time.

Meanwhile, give us the strength we need by your grace and by the power of the spirit to persevere and to be sanctified and to follow you and to always cling to you. We pray for each and every one of us here by the mercies of Christ Jesus. Amen.