

# "RIGHTLY DIVIDING THE WORD"

By Berl Chisum

***The Bible is the Word of God.*** It reveals the Person, character and works of the Creator. It makes known His eternal purposes in creating the heavens and earth and all living beings. It records the history of man: his origin, his original innocence and fall from innocence; and it outlines the different ages of God's dealings with him—both presently, in the past, and in the future. The Bible unfolds God's plan for man's redemption from the fall, the price He paid to accomplish it, and the blessed future of those who receive it. It also tells the fate of hardhearted rebels who reject their Creator-Redeemer's great love. It sufficiently supplies our need for the knowledge of God, and is an adequate chart, compass and guide for us in the life that now is, and in things eternal.

***The Bible bears analysis.*** It is composed of 66 books written over a period of about 1500 years by approximately 40 human scribes, *yet it is one book and has only one Author.* It has definite order, structure and continuity. The more carefully it is scrutinized, the more apparent are its unity, harmony, and perfection to honest, God-fearing students. Ungodly men have tried to explain it as the product of natural causes, and have tried to prove it contradictory and fraudulent. These have found disciples among those "who love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil," but they have been answered and proven false time and again. As well try to prove that sunshine, air, food and water are not necessary for man's needs as reject the Scriptures as being *the* source for the knowledge of God and what is for man's eternal good.

***There are four cardinal rules for Bible understanding.*** We must observe (1) Who is speaking, (2) Who is being spoken to, (3) On what authority are the words spoken, and (4) To what age, or time period do the words apply.

Though the Bible is God's infallible inspired record, it not only records God's own words, but also words of men and women, and words spoken by angels, Satan and demons. Some of the recorded words of men, Satan and demons are lies which contradict the true words of God contained therein. Also, some of God's words are applicable only to a particular individual or group of individuals and only for a particular time. There were times when men spoke and wrote words which God gave them as His words, while at other times they were inspired to speak and write their own words and human observations which did not have infallible authority.

We are assured of God's help in observing these rules of correct understanding if we carefully study the Bible itself with the desire to be approved of God and accepted with Him. See Psalm 25:9; John 7:17; Luke 24:45; I Corinthians 2:9-12; & I John 2:20,27.

***The accompanying chart*** is presented as a broad outline, analysis, and illustration of Bible taught truth. We believe it to be a helpful aid to understanding the over-all Bible story, though it is obviously limited and inadequate to encompass the whole of revealed truth.

## AGES AND DISPENSATIONS

There are seven ages, or dispensations, outlining the periods and characteristics of man's probation: the ages of Innocence, Conscience, Human Government, Promise, Law, Grace, and Kingdom. Ages are time periods. A dispensation, in the Divine dealing, is a particular order of things determined by a revelation of God's will outlining man's responsibility in relationship to Himself. Strictly speaking, the words "age" and "dispensation" in Biblical usage do not exactly mean the same thing, but the various ages in God's dealings with mankind have begun with God-given revelation defining human responsibility; and since the word "dispensation" basically means "stewardship," or order of things defining responsibility, those time periods have come to be called "dispensations."

1. ***The Age of Innocence*** - Adam and Eve, fresh from the creative hand of God in Eden, were innocent. They had unbroken and joyful communion with their Maker and dominion over all living creatures on earth, but they had one condition to meet in order to thus continue. God had commanded them not to eat of "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." Eve, at the urging of the Serpent, ate of that forbidden tree, gave to Adam and he ate, and thus they believed the Serpent rather than God, rebelled against God's command, lost their innocence, and that brief glorious age ended for them. See Genesis 2:7-3:24.

2. ***The Age of Conscience*** - Through Adam and Eve's eating of "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil," they and their posterity gained a consciousness of good and evil. Human conduct thus came to be primarily governed by conscience. Under conscience the morality of mankind progressively declined until after about 1500 years. We read that "God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually," (Genesis 6:5). The consequence of man's failure under conscience was the flood which destroyed all flesh off the earth except for Noah and his wife, his three sons and their wives, and the animals which they took into the Ark with them. Genesis 6:1-8:22.

3. ***The Age of Human Government*** - After the flood, God made a covenant with Noah and all flesh that He would never again send a universal flood to destroy all flesh, and He gave the rainbow for a token of that covenant. Also, He told Noah and his family that the flesh of all kind of animals would be for their food. God also added a new element for the governing of their conduct; He established the basis of human civil government by placing judicial and executive powers into the hands of men, and He instituted capital punishment by ordaining, "and surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it, and at the hand of man; at the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man. *Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed;* for in the image of God made He man." Genesis 9:5,6.

Under human government we read of the rise of Nimrod, the beginning of whose kingdom included Babel, (Gen. 10:8-10). At Babel Noah's progeny began to build the tower of Babel. The keynote of Nimrod's reign and their building was "substitution" They forsook God's reign for Nimrod's substitute reign against God; they should have been united under God's rule, but they sought a name and unity of their own devising. In building the tower of Babel, "they had brick *for stone*, and slime had they *for mortar*;" and the top of their tower was to be "unto heaven"—doubtless unto the worship of the heavenly bodies, the sun, moon, and stars; and thus ancient

Babylon became the fountainhead of all pagan idolatry. They thus substituted a false worship for the worship of the true God. In parallel fashion, men today choose religious names of their own invention and build edifices for worship in the names which they have substituted for the all-sufficient name of our Lord Jesus Christ. This has resulted in widespread religious confusion rather than Christian unity. See Col. 3:17; 1 Cor. 1:10; Acts 7:48-50; & 17:24,25.

Under human government man failed, and the judgment of God fell with the Lord confounding their tongues and scattering them abroad on the face of the earth. See Genesis 11:1-9.

4. ***The Age of Promise*** - Out of the scattered throng, God called a man named Abram (later Abraham) to leave Ur of the Chaldees and come to Canaan. He gave wonderful promises to Abraham which brought in the age of promise. There were promises of personal greatness to Abraham; promises of national greatness and inheritance of the land of Canaan to Abraham and his posterity, and the promise of blessings to all nations through him. This promise of blessing to all nations is called the gospel in Galatians 3:8,9. And Galatians 3:14-29 makes it clear that this was the promise of forgiveness of sins and spiritual life through Abraham's seed, Christ, that is received by faith—by believing on Abraham's seed, as Abraham did.

These promises were reiterated to Abraham's son Isaac, to Isaac's son Jacob (later named Israel), and to the twelve sons of Jacob and their descendants. See Genesis 11:26-12:9; 13:14-17; 15:1-18; 17:1-8,19; 22:15-18; 26:1-4; 28:10-16 & Exodus 2:24; 6:2-8.

In the days of Jacob and Joseph, Israel and his family went down into Egypt where they eventually became slaves of the Egyptians. At God's appointed time He sent Moses to deliver Israel (who had come to number about 3,000,000 people) out of Egypt and lead them back to the land of promise. This was accomplished through great displays of God's power and judgments on the Egyptians, and God brought them safely out of Egypt to Himself at Mt. Sinai, where they were to worship Him. See Exo. 1-18.

It was at Mt. Sinai that redeemed Israel failed under the Promise and brought upon themselves a terrible yoke of bondage. They forsook the Abrahamic promises and asked to find justification and blessing from God on the basis of their own "doing" their own works. Instead of continuing under the gracious promises made to Abraham under which God brought them unto Himself (Exo. 2:24; 6:2-8; 19:4), they brazenly asserted "All that the Lord hath spoken **we** will do," (Exo. 19:8); and God's response was to make Himself unapproachable in a dark cloud, with thunder, lightning, earthquake, the sound of a trumpet, bounds around the mountain, and a warning that anyone who broke through would perish. Then God gave them the Ten Commandments which pronounced such condemnation on them as helpless sinners that they said unto Moses, "Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak to us lest we die, (Exo. 19,20). Later there were added other statutes, judgments and ordinances.

Thus the chosen nation passed from under Promise, as the primary basis of their relationship with God, to "under the Law."

5. ***The Dispensation of the Law*** - the Law dispensation was not an uninterrupted age as such. It began with the giving of the ten commandments and continued in practice until after the Age

of Grace began. It was interrupted by the Age of Grace and it will continue for a space of time after the Age of Grace is over. *It is inseparably connected to Israel and God's dealing with them as a nation.* The law was given Israel to stop their mouths about what *they* would do, give them a knowledge of sin, and point them to Christ as the only way to escape condemnation and come to God. See Romans 3:19-28; Galatians 3:10-12,22-25.

Israel rejected and crucified Christ when He came to earth, but on the cross He prayed for them, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do," (Luke 23:34). The forgiven nation was then given the opportunity to repent of their self-righteousness and rejection of their Messiah. This opportunity was proffered them for about 30 years after the cross, during the historical period of the book of Acts. While God's special national mercy was still extended to them, the temple in Jerusalem remained standing, and law observances were continued by the Jews, including the apostles and other thousands of Jews which believed. See Acts 2:46; 3:1; 16:3; 18:18,21; 20:16; 21:17-26; 1 Cor. 7:18; 9:19,20.

There was a *gradual* withdrawal of special favor to Israel, and a *gradual* turning of God's national mercy to the Gentiles, as the Jews were evangelized during the Acts period in the various cities where they lived throughout the world. See Acts 11:19; 13:44-46; 17:1-3,10,11; 18:4-6; 19:8,9; 28:16-31 & Rom. 11:7-25. (Write us for a more detailed study on the transition which occurred during the Acts period).

Their failure as a nation to repent resulted in the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, the center of law-worship, and of Jerusalem itself. The Jews remaining in Palestine were scattered among the nations to "abide many days (almost 2000 years now) without a king, and without a sacrifice," (Hosea 3:4). This destruction and scattering was carried out at the hands of the Roman ruler Titus in 70 A.D.

After the Age of Grace runs its course, God will again deal with Israel nationally, the temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem, and the Law dispensation will continue during an awful day of trouble for Israel at the hands of Gentile persecutors, and during an outpouring of terrible judgments from heaven that will fall upon the world. The return of the Lord Jesus from heaven to save a repentant remnant of Israel from utter destruction, to judge the nations, and to establish the reign of God on earth, will terminate the Law dispensation, as such, and usher in the New Covenant Kingdom Age. See Rom. 11:25-29; Dan. 12:1; Matt. 24:3-31; 25:31-46; II Thess. 2:1-12; Rev. 6:1-17; 8:2-10:7; 16:1-21 & 19:11-20:6.

**6. *The Age of Grace*** - This is a parenthetical period not envisioned in the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures. Its characteristic is "grace;" that is, unmerited favor from God to a world which failed under conscience, human government, promise and law, and finally crucified God's dear Son. Under grace God is withholding judgment upon sin and sinners, while He gives generation after generation opportunity to be saved. See 2 Peter 3:9,15-16; & Rom. 5:21.

Though the principle of salvation by grace has been true in all ages of God's dealings with mankind, yet now this principle of grace is going to be emphasized. The basis of salvation by grace was laid in Christ's death on the cross, His burial and resurrection the third day (1 Cor. 15:1-4), not because wicked men slew Him, but because God the father *gave* Him to die in the

sinner's place, (John 3:14-18). His substitutionary sufferings on the cross and in hell for three days and nights propitiated the justice of God which demanded the death of sinners. Christ's sufferings made it possible for a holy God to be gracious to undeserving sinners and win them to Himself by the manifestation of His love for them. See Rom. 2:4; 5:6-11; 2 Cor. 5:18-21; Col. 1:20; & 1 John 4:8,9.

Another characteristic of the Age of Grace is the word "mystery." There are five important mysteries, or sacred secrets, revealed in Paul's epistles about the characteristics of this age. They are:

1. A mystery period of time during which Israel is nationally blinded, which will last "*until* the fulness of the Gentiles be come in," (Rom.11:25).
2. The mystery of the one body of Christ, the Church, "*one new man.*" Since the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Acts 2, all who believe the gospel of Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, have been spiritually baptized into one spiritual body, the Church of Jesus Christ, in which they are no longer regarded as Jew or Gentile, but are new creatures in Christ. See Acts 2:47; I Cor.12:12,13; Eph. 2:11-3:10; 2 Cor. 5:16,17.
3. "The mystery of Godliness"—God manifest in human flesh; first in Christ, and then through the Holy Spirit indwelling members of the Church and producing His fruit; "Christ in you, the hope of glory." See 1 Tim. 3:15,16; & Col. 1:24-27.
4. "The mystery of iniquity," which had already begun to work when the apostle Paul lived on earth. This was and is a lawless infiltration and leavening of the fellowship and testimony for truth of the saints of God by ungodly, demon and devil-inspired false teachers, and the building of a great counterfeit church system which professes to be Christ's true Church representing Him on earth. It is Satan's caricature of "the mystery of Godliness," (2 Thess. 2:7).
5. The mystery of Christ's coming for the members of the church which He is building during the age of grace: His coming to resurrect those who died in Christ, to change the living saints by giving them immortal bodies, and catching them all up *together* to meet Him in the air. See 1 Cor. 15:51-57 & 1 Thess. 4:13-18.

During this age of Grace, Christ is seated at God's right hand in heaven, and the age will end with His coming to catch away from the earth the ones who have been saved by His grace and made members of His Church. We are doubtless approaching the end of the age and that rapturous event. See Eph. 1:19-23; Philip. 2:5-11; 1 Thess. 4:13-18.

At the beginning of the age of Grace, Israel was gradually broken out of the good olive tree of God's national favor and was cast among the nations. At the close of the age and after the Tribulation they will be restored to the place of prominence in God's national dealing. During the time of their blindness and fall, Gentiles have been grafted into the place of national favor and God has shown mercy and undeserved kindness to all men of all nations. See again Romans chapter 11.

*The Tribulation period*, which follows the age of Grace, is not a new age or dispensation, but as we have already pointed out is a continuation of the dispensation of Law during which God continues His *prophesied* program with Israel and the other nations and pours out His judgments on a world which rejected His grace. This period will end with Christ's return to the earth to complete the judgment and establish God's millennial kingdom on earth.

7. ***The Kingdom Age*** - this is the final time-period during which men will be tested by the opportunity to turn to God and receive His salvation, or turn from Him and reject the Savior, thus determining their final destiny. This age will last for 1,000 years, beginning with the return of the Lord Jesus Christ from heaven to reign in power and great glory. During this time Israel will be supreme among the nations and universal peace and prosperity will prevail, with even ravenous beasts perfectly tame. See Rev. 20:1-6; & Isa. 11:1-16.

The characteristics of the preceding ages will be in manifestation: (1) The resurrected saints will be there in innocence to reign with Christ; (2) Consciences will have been cleansed and the knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth; (3) A Man will reign on David's throne in Jerusalem-the perfectly just, all knowing, all-powerful God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ; (4) The previously unrealized promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will begin to be fulfilled and will continue to be fulfilled forever; (5) The Law will be implanted in the hearts of the saved nation of Israel; and (6) God's saving grace will still be extended to children born on earth during that time. See 2 Sam. 7:10-17; Isa. 9:6,7; Luke 1:32,33; Ezek. 37:21-28; & Jer. 31:31-37.

At the beginning of the kingdom age Satan will be bound and cast into the bottomless pit. At the close he will be loosed for a little season in order to test those who have lived in an earthly paradise under Christ as to whether they choose to willingly continue as subjects of Christ's righteous reign or turn from Him in rebellion to follow Satan. Those who were born during the millennium, but not tested by Satan, will thus be called upon to choose God or the devil. We read that Satan finds disciples from the four quarters of the earth who join him in compassing the camp of the saints about. But then fire comes down from God out of heaven and devours them. The Devil is cast into the lake of fire where he will be tormented day and night for ever and ever. Thus will be terminated the ages of human probation. See Rev. 20:1-10.

Following Satan's doom, all the unrighteous dead of every age will be resurrected to stand before the great white throne on which God sits in judgment. They will be judged according to their works and it will be shown that their names are not written in the book of life because they rejected Christ and His substitutionary sufferings and death for them, and they too will be cast into the lake of fire. See Rev. 20:11-15.

Then will come the new heavens and the new earth, with the new Jerusalem descending from God out of heaven, and all of the redeemed of all ages will enter into everlasting glory and bliss with their wonderful Lord, Savior and God. See Revelation chapters 21 and 22.

THE END