

# THE PRINCIPLES AND DISPENSATIONS OF GOD

One of the first lessons the Bible student should learn is the difference between the principles and the dispensations of God. The opponents of dispensationalism have often charged us with teaching, for example, that under the Old Testament men were saved by the works of the law, whereas today they are saved by grace through faith.

This charge is at least misleading, for no thinking dispensationalist would teach that the works of the law *in themselves* could ever save, or even help save, anyone. We understand clearly that "*by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin*" (Rom. 3:20). Nor do we suppose that the works of the ceremonial law had any essential power to save. We have not forgotten that the Scriptures also teach that "*it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins*" (Heb. 10:4).

We have no illusions as to man's utter inability to please God by works *as such* in any age. Man has always been saved essentially by the grace of God, through faith. There could be no other way to be saved. This is a fixed principle to which Hebrews 11 bears abundant testimony and it should be self-evident to those who accept as facts the utter depravity of man and the infinite holiness of God.

But this does not alter the fact that God's dealings with men and the stated terms of acceptance with Him have changed again and again down through the ages and that faith in Him would therefore be expressed in different ways. Hebrews 11 also bears consistent testimony to this fact. Faith would most assuredly approach God in God's way at any time, and to seek to gain acceptance with Him in any other way would, of course, be *unbelief* and self-will. Thus, while works never did or could save *as such*, they did once save as *expressions of faith*.

## THE PRINCIPLES OF GOD

A *principle*, as we have used the word above, is a settled rule of morality or conduct. We respect men with principles; men who stand for the right, whatever the cost. God, of course, has the very highest principles and never deviates from them. He always did and always will hate sin. Sin always was and always will be contrary to His holy nature. In no age has this been any less so than in any other age. In like manner, God always did and always will delight in righteousness, mercy and love. God never has and never will deviate in the slightest degree from these principles.

The *principle* of law or justice, for example, has continued unchanged through the ages. No matter what the dispensation, when wrong is done God's sense of *justice* is offended. This may be simply demonstrated by three Scriptural examples:

*Cain* lived *before* the dispensation of the law by Moses. Cain murdered his brother Abel. Was this right or wrong? Did he get into trouble over it? He did, although the written law had not yet been given.

*David* lived *under* the law of Moses. He also committed murder. Was this right or wrong? Wrong, of course, and he also got into trouble over it.

*You and I* live *after* the law, under the dispensation of grace. Suppose we should commit murder, would that be right or wrong? Would we get into trouble over it - *with God*? Would the fact that Christ bore our sins on Calvary, make murder any more right? Would God look upon it as less sinful because it took place under the dispensation of grace?

You say, in the case of the true believer today, the full legal penalty for the sin would still have been borne by Christ and, though he knew it not, David too was forgiven on this ground. But does not the very fact that David's sins and ours were *paid for*, rather than overlooked, *prove* that the principles of law and justice remain fixed?

The principle of grace is equally unchangeable. This may be simply demonstrated by one passage of Scripture: Rom. 4:1-6:

*Abraham* lived *before* the dispensation of the law. How was he justified?

"*Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness*" (Rom.4:3).

*David* lived *under* the law. How was he justified?

"*David also describeth the blessedness of the man unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works*" (Rom. 4:6).

*You and I* live *after* the law, under the dispensation of grace. How are we justified?

"*To him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness*" (Rom. 4:5).

Now in the cases of Abraham and David, works were *required* for salvation, whereas in our case works for salvation are distinctly *forbidden*; yet it is clear from the passages above that Abraham, David and we were *all* saved *essentially* by grace through faith and that works *as such* have never had any saving value.

## **THE DISPENSATIONS OF GOD**

### **WHAT IS A DISPENSATION?**

While the principles of God have to do with His *character*, His *nature*, the dispensations of God concern His *dealings* with those under Him, especially with man.

Many people have been frightened away from dispensationalism by the length of the word itself, especially since some who seek to rightly divide the Word have been called *Ultradispensationatists!* The root of this long word, however, has a very simple meaning, for the word *dispense* means simply *to deal out*. The word *dispensation*, then, means *the act of dispensing or dealing out*, or, *that which is dispensed or dealt out*. There are medical *dispensaries*, for example, where medicines are *dispensed* to the poor. Sometimes these *dispensations* are conducted on a particular day of each week. Now such a dispensation of medicine may take a full twelve hours each week, but it does not follow from this that a dispensation is a period of twelve hours!

Yet there are some who, when they think of dispensations, can think of nothing but periods of time! Indeed, one of the greatest Bible teachers of the past generation defined a dispensation as follows: "A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God."

This is incorrect, for a dispensation is *not* a period of time but *the act of dealing out* or *that which is dealt out*. The Bible teacher above referred to doubtless meant that a dispensation *covers* a period of time. The word *dispensation* is not a mere theological term. It is used many times in the Bible, though not always translated thus. In Eph. 3:2, for example, Paul writes of "*the dispensation of the grace of*

God, which is given me to you-ward."

Just as the dispensation of the law was committed to Moses ([John 1:17](#)), so the dispensation of the grace of God was committed to Paul.

The organic meaning of the original word for *dispensation* (*oikonomia*) is *house management*, though its usage conforms closely to the English word *dispensation*. Sometimes this word is translated *stewardship* in the Authorized Version.

This is interesting because the word *steward* (*oikonomos*), rather than meaning *servant*, as some have supposed, means *house manager*. The steward was the *head* servant, the one into whose hands the management of the house was committed. He dealt out the money for the household necessities, dispensed the food and clothing to the servants and children, paid the wages, etc. All was entrusted to him to dispense faithfully and wisely. He was the appointed *dispenser* of his Lord's goods and of the business of the household.<sup>2</sup>

Thus we read in Luke 12:42:

**"And the Lord said, Who then is that faithful and wise steward [oikonomos] whom his lord shall make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of meat in due season?"**

In Luke 16:1,2, where again the words *oikonomos* and *oikonomia* are translated *steward* and *stewardship*, we have the same idea:

**"And He said also unto His disciples, There was a certain rich man, which had a steward; and the same was accused unto him that he had wasted his goods.**

**"And he called him, and said unto him, How is it that I hear this of thee? Give an account of thy stewardship; for thou mayest be no longer steward."**

In I Cor. 9:16,17 this same word is again translated *dispensation*, but once more it conveys the same idea:

**"For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for NECESSITY IS LAID UPON ME; yea, woe is unto me if I preach not the gospel!**

**"For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward; but [even] if against my will [I MUST do it, for] A DISPENSATION OF THE GOSPEL IS COMMITTED UNTO ME."**

Note that in each of these cases the idea of *responsibility* is involved. It was "a *faithful and wise steward*" the Lord sought to set over his household. The rich man discharged his steward because he had wasted his goods. Necessity, or responsibility, was laid upon Paul because "a dispensation of the gospel" had been committed to him.

One of the clearest passages of all in this connection is found in I Cor. 4:1,2, where the Apostle Paul says:

**"LET A MAN SO ACCOUNT OF US AS OF THE MINISTERS [SERVANTS] OF CHRIST AND STEWARDS [DISPENSERS] OF THE MYSTERIES OF GOD. "MOREOVER, IT IS REQUIRED IN STEWARDS THAT A MAN BE FOUND FAITHFUL."**

<sup>2</sup> Eleazar and Joseph were such stewards (Gen. 15:2, 24:2, 39:4).

Let us get this meaning of the word *dispensation* clearly fixed in our minds. When we see that a dispensation involves *responsibility* rather than merely denoting a period of time, we will, if sincerely desirous to be in the will of God, seek to understand clearly and to carry out faithfully, the dispensation of the grace of God committed to us.

### **CHANGES IN THE DISPENSATIONS OF GOD**

It must be evident to the most casual reader of the Scriptures that a great change in God's dealings with man took place at the fall. Previous to that Adam and Eve had enjoyed unbroken fellowship with God, dwelling in blissful innocence in the beautiful garden of Eden.

But now all was changed. Sin had caused a separation from God. Adam and Eve were driven from the garden. A sense of blameworthiness overcame them which, from then on, was to play a large part in their actions. Ashamed, now, to appear before God as they were, they had to be clothed. Adam had to earn a living for himself and his family by hard toil and Eve was to bring forth children in sorrow. Worst of all, sin had entered into the world, and death by sin. All this, of course, involved a change in man's responsibilities to God and to others.

From this point on God's dealings with men changed again and again. Human Government was instituted after the flood, with Noah ([Gen. 9:6](#)), the dispensation of promise began with Abram ([Gen. 12:1-3](#)), "the law was given by Moses" ([John 1:17](#)), "grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" ([John 1:17](#)) and was dispensed by Paul, the chief of sinners, saved by grace ([Eph. 3:1-3](#)).

The foregoing are some of the most prominent dispensational changes to date, but these may be subdivided and there are still others to come. Thus, while the principles of God never change, His dispensations, His dealings with men, do change from time to time. This includes even the terms of acceptance with God. At first blood sacrifices were required ([Gen. 4:3-5](#), [Heb. 11:4](#)); then, later, circumcision was added ([Gen. 17:14](#)); then obedience to the whole Mosaic law was demanded ([Ex. 19:5, 6](#), [Rom. 10:5](#)); then "the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" ([Mark 1:4](#), [Acts 2:38](#)) and today it is

**"TO HIM THAT WORKETH NOT, BUT BELIEVETH ON HIM THAT JUSTIFIETH THE UNGODLY;  
HIS FAITH IS COUNTED FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS" (Rom. 4:5).**

ADAM	ADAM	NOAH	ABRAHAM	MOSES	PAUL	CHRIST
Created In God's Image	Fallen In Sin	First Civil Ruler	Father of Believers	The Law Giver	Chief of Sinners Saved	The Shepherd King
Gen. 1:26, 27	Rom. 5:12	Gen. 9:1-7	Rom. 4:9-12	John 1:17	1 Tim. 1:13-16	Jer. 23:5, 6
<b>THE PRINCIPLES OF GOD</b> <b>ETERNAL AND UNCHANGEABLE</b> <b>Salvation always essentially by Grace through Faith</b>						
↓ The DISPEN- SATION of	↓ The DISPEN- SATION of	↓ The DISPEN- SATION of	↓ The DISPEN- SATION of	↓ The DISPEN- SATION of	↓ The DISPEN- SATION of	↓ The DISPEN- SATION of
INNOCENCE	CONSCIENCE	HUMAN GOVERNMENT	PROMISE	LAW	GRACE	KINGDOM
Gen. 2:8-17 Gen. 2:25	Gen. 3:8-10 Rom. 2:11-15	Gen. 9:6 Rom. 13:1	Gen. 12:1-3 Gen. 22:17, 18	Ex. 20:1-26 Gal. 3:19	Rom. 5:20, 21 Eph. 3:1-4	Isa. 9:6-7 Isa. 11:1-9

This chart is not meant to indicate the *close* of any dispensation, but rather the changes or advances in God's dealings with men, for some of the dispensations have not yet closed. For example: while the call of Abraham ushered in the dispensation of promise, it did not bring the preceding dispensation to a close, for human government is still in force today.

Note carefully that while God *refuses* works for salvation today, He *required* them under other dispensations. This was not, as we have explained, because works in *themselves* could ever save, but because they were the necessary expression of faith when so required.

Tradition has it that men have always been saved through faith in the shed blood of Christ; that even those who lived before the cross had to look forward in faith to the death of a coming Christ for salvation.

It is high time that this false notion, so deeply rooted in the minds of even sincere believers, be shattered, for it does not have one single line of Scriptural support. Let us not be misunderstood. It is true that all the saints of past ages were saved through the *merits* of Christ's shed blood, but not through their *faith* in that shed blood. Those of past ages were expected to believe only what God had thus far revealed, or what He had revealed to *them*. In other words, they were saved simply because they trusted God and believed what He said. The full plan of salvation has since been unfolded, but the Scriptures make it crystal clear that these believers were saved without even understanding that Christ would die for them.

1 Pet. 1:10,11 alone makes this clear:

**"OF WHICH SALVATION THE PROPHETS HAVE INQUIRED AND SEARCHED DILIGENTLY, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: "SEARCHING WHAT, or what manner of time, THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST WHICH WAS IN THEM DID SIGNIFY, WHEN IT [HE] TESTIFIED BEFOREHAND THE SUFFERINGS OF CHRIST, AND THE GLORY THAT SHOULD FOLLOW."**

Mark well, they did not search merely concerning the "manner of time," i.e., the character of the times, during which these things should transpire. They searched and inquired diligently to discover "WHAT . . . the Spirit . . . did signify," i.e., *what He meant*, "when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow." And the next verse goes on to explain that God revealed to them that they were ministering, not to themselves, but to those of a future time.

Could anything be clearer from this than that they *did not even understand* what the Spirit meant when He predicted the sufferings of Christ? How, then, could they have been saved through faith in His shed blood?

An indignant opponent of dispensationalism once asked us: "Do you mean to tell us that Moses commanded the building of the tabernacle with its gate and curtains, its brazen altar and laver, its table of shewbread, its golden lampstand and altar of incense, its ark of the covenant and mercy seat, *and did not tell them that all these were types of Christ and His finished work?*"

Our reply was simply, "*What saith the Scripture?*" Is there any hint whatsoever that Moses told them that these things pointed to Christ or that he even had any idea of this himself? We *now* know that these things were typical of Christ and His work of redemption, and rejoice to see that God had this in mind all the while; that the cross was neither an accident nor an afterthought, but this revelation is conspicuously *absent* from the Old Testament record.

There is no hint that Moses even knew, much less taught, that these things were typical of Christ.<sup>3</sup> If it is true that Moses and the prophets knew and understood about the coming death of Christ and had to trust in His shed blood for salvation, would this not also be true of the twelve apostles? Yet they had labored with Christ Himself for a considerable length of time, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, before He even *began* to tell them that He must suffer and die, and when He did tell them Peter rebuked Him for His "defeatist" attitude!

**Matt. 16:21,22: "From that time forth began Jesus to show unto His disciples, how that He must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day.**

**"Then Peter took Him, and began to rebuke Him, saying, Be it far from Thee, Lord: this shall not be unto Thee."**

Later, when He told them again that these things must come to pass as

<sup>3</sup> It is sometimes presumed from Deut. 18:15-19 that Moses must have known a good deal about the coming Redeemer, but this is reading things into the Scriptures. There is nothing about a *Redeemer* here. This passage merely states that God would raise up to Israel a Prophet to whom they should give heed or suffer the consequences. Shall it be assumed from this that Moses taught his people to trust in the future death of Christ for salvation? And if the very prophets who later *predicted* the death of Christ were not permitted to understand their own and each other's predictions, are we to suppose that Moses understood more than was revealed to them? Let us be careful about assuming that the Old Testament saints "must have understood" these things, and always ask, "*What saith the Scripture?*"

predicted by the prophets, they did not have the slightest idea what He was talking about. This fact is impressed upon us by a three-fold emphasis in Luke 18:34:

1. **"AND THEY UNDERSTOOD NONE OF THESE THINGS:**
2. **"AND THIS SAYING WAS HID FROM THEM,**
3. **"NEITHER KNEW THEY THE THINGS WHICH WERE SPOKEN."**

By this time they had been associated with Christ, preaching the gospel of the kingdom and working miracles, for at least two years, yet they did not even know that He would suffer and die. Does this mean that none of them were saved? Certainly not. It simply confirms what Peter says about the prophets searching and inquiring diligently what the Spirit, who spoke through them, meant when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow.

It may surprise some of our readers to find that even after the resurrection, at Pentecost, Peter himself did not see in the death of Christ what we see in it today. He now knew about the crucifixion, of course, as a historical fact, but he did not base any offer of salvation upon it. Indeed, he *blamed* Israel for it and when his hearers were convicted of their sins and asked what they should do, he replied:

**"REPENT, AND BE BAPTIZED EVERY ONE OF YOU IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST FOR THE REMISSION OF SINS . . ." (Acts 2:38).**

Was this because he was out of the will of God or blinded by unbelief? No; he was "filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:4). It was simply that the "due time" had not yet arrived to make these things known.

This brings us again to the importance of a recognition of the distinctive ministry of Paul. It is not until Paul that we have what is properly called "*the preaching of the cross.*" It is he who first says:

**"BUT NOW THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD WITHOUT THE LAW IS MANIFESTED ...."Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe ...."BEING JUSTIFIED FREELY BY HIS GRACE THROUGH THE REDEMPTION THAT IS IN CHRIST JESUS: "Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation THROUGH FAITH IN HIS BLOOD, to declare HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS FOR THE REMISSION OF SINS THAT ARE PAST,<sup>4</sup> through the forbearance of God; "To declare, I say, AT THIS TIME, His righteousness: that He might be just, and THE JUSTIFIER OF HIM WHICH BELIEVETH IN JESUS" (Rom. 3:21-26).**

This is what the Apostle Paul meant by

**"THE FAITH WHICH SHOULD AFTERWARDS BE REVEALED" (Gal. 3:23).**

This is what he meant when he wrote of Christ:

**"Who gave Himself a ransom for all, TO BE TESTIFIED IN DUE TIME. "WHEREUNTO I AM ORDAINED A PREACHER, AND AN APOSTLE, (I SPEAK THE TRUTH IN CHRIST, AND LIE NOT;) A TEACHER OF THE GENTILES IN FAITH AND VERITY" (I Tim. 2:6,7).**

But this will be further discussed in a later lesson. All we are seeking to establish here is the fact of *progressive revelation* and the utter unscripturalness of the tradition that those who lived before Christ were saved by looking forward in faith to His finished work.

This is not only established in a negative way in the Scriptures; it is also established in a positive way. It is not merely made plain that the saints of past ages did *not* understand about Christ's death, but in many cases we are told exactly what they did know and believe to find acceptance with God.

We have stated that Hebrews 11 makes it clear that salvation has always been the reward of faith. There is one *constant* that runs all down through the chapter: "*By faith ... By faith ... By faith.*" At the introduction to the long list of acts of faith wrought by individuals, we read that "*By it [faith] the elders*

*obtained a good report"* and that *"without faith it is impossible to please [God]"* and the whole long list closes with the statement: *"These all ... obtained a good report through faith"* (Verses 2,6,39).

But there are *variables* in Hebrews 11 too, for in almost every case these heroes of faith believed some different revelation of God and expressed their faith in some different way. But nowhere in this list of saints do we read of one who was saved by faith in the death of a coming Christ. It is *we* who *now* know that they were saved through the death of Christ. And when Christ is preached

i.e., "the transgressions that were under the first testament" (Heb. 9:15).

to *us*, we show *our* faith by ceasing our works and accepting with humble thanks what *He* has done for us. In Heb. 11:4 we are told precisely how Abel obtained divine witness that he was righteous:

**"BY FAITH ABEL OFFERED UNTO GOD A MORE EXCELLENT SACRIFICE THAN CAIN, BY WHICH HE OBTAINED WITNESS THAT HE WAS RIGHTEOUS, GOD TESTIFYING OF HIS GIFTS; and by it be, being dead, yet speaketh."**

This agrees with the record in Gen. 4:4,5:

**"And the Lord had respect unto ABEL AND to HIS OFFERING, "But unto CAIN AND to HIS OFFERING He had not respect."**

There is not one word here about faith in the death of Christ. Abel obtained witness that he was righteous *because he brought the required sacrifice* and God testified, not of his faith in Christ, but of *his gifts*.

In Heb. 11:7 we are further told exactly how Noah became an heir of *"the righteousness which is by faith."*

**"BY FAITH NOAH, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, PREPARED AN ARK, to the saving of his house [from the flood]; BY WHICH HE CONDEMNED THE WORLD AND BECAME HEIR OF THE RIGHTEOUSNESS WHICH IS BY FAITH."**

Could anything be plainer than this? How did Noah become an heir of the righteousness which is by faith? By trusting in the death of a coming Christ? No, by believing what God had said about the flood, and building an ark. And so on down the chapter. Each of these elders obtained a good report because he believed God's word to *him*.

What about Abraham, God's great example of faith? How was he justified?

**"What saith the Scripture? ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD AND IT WAS COUNTED UNTO HIM FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS" (Rom. 4:3).**

But what had God said that Abraham believed? Had God told him about a coming Christ who would die on a cross for him? Read the record and see, for this passage in Romans is quoted from Gen. 15:5,6:

**"And [the Lord] brought him forth abroad, and said, look now toward heaven, and tell [count] the stars, If thou be able to number them: and He said unto him, So shall thy seed be. "AND HE BELIEVED IN THE LORD; AND HE COUNTED IT TO HIM FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS."**

Again we ask: could anything be plainer than this? Is there one word here about the death of Christ? Certainly not. God simply promised here to multiply Abraham's seed, and Abraham believed God and trusted Him to keep His word.

It was this simple faith in God that God counted to him for righteousness. We *now* know that it was on the *basis* of the coming death of Christ that God could justly do this, but that was not yet revealed to Abraham.

Later God gave the law and demanded perfect obedience for acceptance with Him ([Ex. 19:5,6](#), [Rom. 10:5](#)). He knew, of course, that no man could keep it perfectly, but He knew too that true believers would earnestly seek to keep it and He would honor their faith in Him. Also, *He* had Christ in mind to pay the penalty for a broken law so that His righteousness might be imputed to those who had taken His word seriously.

That *He* had the plan of redemption in mind all the while is indicated by the fact that He had them put the covenant of the law in a coffin <sup>5</sup> and met them, through their high priest, at the blood sprinkled mercy seat, but He did not explain the significance of all this to them. He must first *demonstrate* historically man's utter inability to keep God's holy law.

We know, for example, that David was really saved by God's grace, not by his own feeble works, but suppose he had proclaimed salvation "*without the law*" or, like Paul, had said: "*Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days*" ([Col. 2:16](#))!

He would soon have been forced to abdicate his throne and would have been put to death for despising the written law of God. Again we are told exactly how John the Baptist's hearers received the remission of sins. Was it by faith in the death of Christ, who had by then already appeared on the scene? Read the Scriptures and see:

**"John did baptize In the wilderness, and preach THE BAPTISM OF REPENTANCE FOR THE REMISSION OF SINS" (Mark 1:4).**

<sup>5</sup>The ark of the covenant was really the *coffin* of the covenant. The original word is translated *coffin* in Gen. 50:26.

If these words do not mean what they say, then the Scriptures serve no purpose whatever as a revelation from God to man.<sup>6</sup>

Suppose while John preached the baptism of repentance for remission of sins, some Israelite had risen to say: "*To him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness*" (Rom. 4:5)!

He would have been taken out and stoned in accordance with the law. Yes, and on the positive side we are even told how the 3,000 at Pentecost found the remission of sins:

**"Now when they heard this, they were pricked In their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? "Then Peter said unto them . . ."**

What did he say? Note it carefully. Did he say: "Christ died for your sins. Simply trust Him and eternal life is yours"? He did not. His entire Pentecostal address will be searched in vain for any such statement. Indeed, Peter's hearers had become convicted because he had *charged* them with the guilt of Christ's death. And when they asked what they must do, Peter replied:

**"REPENT, AND BE BAPTIZED EVERY ONE OF YOU IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST FOR THE REMISSION OF SINS, AND YE SHALL RECEIVE THE GIFT OF THE HOLY GHOST" (Acts 2:37,38).**

This was in perfect conformity with the requirements of the so-called "great commission," which the church of today seeks, in a half-hearted way, to carry out:

**"And He said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel <sup>7</sup> to every creature. "HE THAT BELIEVETH AND IS BAPTIZED SHALL BE SAVED; BUT HE THAT BELIEVETH NOT<sup>8</sup> SHALL BE DAMNED [CONDEMNED]" (Mark 16:15,16).**

We are aware that some, to uphold their own baptism theories, have interpreted this to mean, "He that believeth and is saved ought to be baptized,"

<sup>6</sup> Had John understood all that we now see in his inspired statement in John 1:29, his whole message would have been different, but the time for this had not yet come.

<sup>7</sup> Here many anticipate revelation. They suppose the eleven were sent out to preach "the gospel of the grace of God," which is not even mentioned until we come to Paul.

<sup>8</sup> Whether baptized or not.

but such wresting of the clear words of Scripture cannot but displease God and pervert our understanding of His program.

On the positive side, as on the negative, we again wait for the raising up of Paul before we learn of "the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24), "the dispensation of the grace of God" (Eph. 3:1,2) and "the preaching of the cross," i.e., as glad news to be accepted by faith for salvation (I Cor. 1:18,23, Gal. 6:14, Rom. 3:25,26).

It is evident, then, that the saints of past ages were not all saved by believing the same things, for God did not reveal the same things to them all. Indeed, even the stated terms of salvation were changed from time to time.

### **ANTICIPATING REVELATION**

It is one of the first principles of sound Bible interpretation not to anticipate revelation, yet how many unconsciously do this! They read the Old Testament and the gospel records as though the saints of those times must have understood all about the death of Christ as it is presented in Romans, Galatians and Ephesians!

Think a moment: Had Abel understood about the death of Christ for sin, would a blood sacrifice have been required of him? Should he not, in such a case, have rested in the complete redemption to be wrought by Christ? Would not the bringing of a blood sacrifice, in such a case, have indicated *unbelief* rather than faith?

Now that the death of Christ has been pro-claimed for salvation, does God command *us* to offer animals in sacrifice? Suppose we should offer such sacrifices only as symbolic of His death, to help us worship Him better, would that be merely *unnecessary* or would it be *wrong*? In the light of Paul's epistles it would, of course, be wrong.<sup>9</sup> Yet many have a hazy idea that those who lived before Christ offered their sacrifices with the full understanding that they typified the death of Christ on Calvary.

The fact is that these types were not understood until *after* the Antitype had appeared. We *now* rejoice, as we consider them, in the proof that God had Calvary in mind all the while; that the death of

Christ was not an accident or an after-thought. But God was teaching one lesson at a time: first the shadows, then the substance; first the sacrifices, then later, Christ the great, all-sufficient Sacrifice.

9 And in the light of Paul's epistles it is equally wrong to observe any ceremony once required for salvation. See Col. 2:14,20.

## **THE HARMONY BETWEEN THE PRINCIPLES AND DISPENSATIONS OF GOD**

But do not the principles and the dispensations of God conflict? No indeed. Men in every age have been saved simply by *believing God* and approaching Him in His appointed way. When works were required for salvation, they did not save *as such*, but only as the required expression of faith. With the Old Testament saints the bringing of the required sacrifices, etc., constituted "the obedience of faith." With us, resting in the finished work of Christ for salvation is "the obedience of faith." See [Rom. 1:5](#), [6:17](#), [15:18](#), [16:26](#), [Heb. 5:9](#), [11:8](#).

When God says, "Offer an animal in sacrifice and I will accept you," what will faith do? Faith will offer an animal in sacrifice, of course. Abel did this and was accepted, not because the blood of beasts can take away sins, but because he approached God in *God's way*. This is "the obedience of faith."

In the case of Cain we have a clear indication that God is not satisfied with mere works, as such, for Cain offered a more attractive-looking sacrifice than Abel, but was rejected because he did not bring the sacrifice which God had required ([Gen. 4:5](#)).

When God says: "Build an ark and I will save you and yours from the flood," what will faith do? Faith will build an ark, of course. And when Noah did this he showed his faith in God and "became an heir of the righteousness which is by faith."

When God says, "Obey my voice indeed and you will be Mine," what will faith do? Faith will try earnestly to obey. You say: But they could not obey perfectly, therefore would be rejected by God. We reply that we have already proved that works in themselves cannot save. It was only as Israelites recognized the law as *the Word of God* to them and *therefore* sought to obey it that they were saved.

Such an effort to keep the law represented "the obedience of faith." When God says, "Repent and be baptized for the remission of sins," what will faith do? Just one thing: repent and be baptized. We know that oceans of water cannot wash away one sin, yet when John the Baptist and Peter preached repentance and baptism for remission not one of their hearers would have interpreted their words to mean: "Trust in the death of Christ for salvation." Indeed, when God required water baptism for salvation the *only* way to manifest faith was to be baptized, and those who refused to do so were condemned for their unbelief:

**"But the Pharisees and lawyers REJECTED THE COUNSEL OF GOD AGAINST THEMSELVES, BEING NOT BAPTIZED OF HIM" (Luke 7:30).**

But when God says, "*BUT NOW the righteousness of God without the law is manifested*" ([Rom. 3:21](#)); "*To him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness*" ([Rom. 4:5](#)); "*Being Justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*" ([Rom. 3:24](#)); "*In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of His grace*" ([Eph. 1:7](#)); "*Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us*" ([Tit. 3:5](#)); "*Not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast*" ([Eph. 2:8,9](#)) - when God now says this, what will faith do?

Faith will say, "This is the most wonderful offer ever made by God to man. I cannot refuse it. I will trust Christ as my Savior and accept salvation as the free gift of God's grace."

So the dispensations of God in no way conflict with His principles, for the Old Testament saints, though saved instrumentally<sup>10</sup> by works, were saved essentially by grace through faith." But now the righteousness of God without the law has been *manifested* (Rom. 3:21). It was "*testified in due time*" through the Apostle Paul (I Tim. 2:6,7). He says it was given to him to "*declare, I say, at this time, His righteousness: that He might be just, and the justifier of Him which believeth in Jesus*" (Rom. 3:26).

Thus, to bring works to God for salvation today would be *unbelief*.

A prominent opponent of these truths has argued that truth is *horizontal*, not vertical, i.e., that it runs on through the ages unchanged and unchangeable. This is true. *Truth* is horizontal, but *the revelation of truth is vertical*, i.e., God has *revealed* truth to man, not all at once, but a little at a time, *historically*. Noah knew more of God's revelation than Adam, Abraham than Noah, Moses than Abraham, the twelve than Moses, Paul than the twelve.

<sup>10</sup> If I drive a screw into a piece of wood with a screwdriver, does the screwdriver do the work, or do I? Shall we say that we each did part of it? No. In one sense the screwdriver did it *all*, for I did not even touch the screw in the operation. But then, the screwdriver was merely the *instrument* I used, so *essentially* it was I who did it all.

So it was with salvation before the dispensation of grace was ushered in. When God required water baptism for the remission of sins, for example, men could get their sins remitted only by submitting to baptism. Thus *instrumentally* it was their baptism that procured for them the remission of sins, yet *essentially* it was God who saved them by grace when He saw their faith.

It may be argued that the believer in such a case had exercised faith in his heart *before* being baptized, so that baptism had nothing whatever to do with his salvation. The answer is that he believed that *being baptized* he would be accepted, and so was, in his heart, already baptized.

This is the answer to problems where impossibilities to fulfil the stated requirements are involved.

Suppose, for example, a man, exercising true faith, was on his way to offer a sacrifice or to be baptized and, on his way, suddenly fell dead. Would he not be accepted? Surely he would; simply because he had come in faith to fulfil the requirement. Thus the thief on the cross was saved without water baptism in a day when baptism was required for the remission of sins, but who can doubt that he would have rejoiced at the opportunity to be baptized had he not been nailed to a cross?

Thus too, the *principles* of God are horizontal; they go on unchanged through every age. But the *dispensations* are *vertical* and follow one after another as God imparts new revelations to man.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See chart on previous page.

