



# Basic Bible Course

by Ira Y. Rice, Jr.

## The Three Dispensations of God's Will to Man



### Lesson Three

**INTRODUCTION:** “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork” (Psa. 19:1). Thus, to know God’s *glory*, and his *handywork*, let us study the heavens and the firmament. But one may study the stars until the day of his death and never know one thing about the *will* of God to mankind. To know God’s **WILL**, man must study His **WORD**.

A careful study of God’s Word, the Bible, shows it is divided into three dispensations of religion—Patriarchal, Jewish and Christian. God revealed His will to men in each dispensation. However, God’s will in one dispensation (i.e. divinely appointed order or system) was not the same in succeeding dispensations. From God’s Word, let us note the basic differences:

#### I. THE PATRIARCHAL DISPENSATION.

(Genesis 1:1 to Exodus 20)

- A. For approximately the first 2,500 years of mankind (i.e. from Adam to Moses), God dealt with human beings as individuals and families.
  - 1. The head of each family, called the “patriarch,” was used as a sort of priest over his family.
- B. During this period, God commanded one thing of one person, another thing of another person; His commands from one person or family to the next were not necessarily the same.

#### EXAMPLES:

- 1. God commanded ADAM AND EVE, “of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Gen. 2:17).
  - a. Adam and Eve ate of this tree—and we know the consequences (Gen. 3:1-24).  
**QUESTION: Whom else, other than these two people Adam and Eve, were ever commanded not to eat of this tree? Answer: NO BODY ELSE.**
- 2. God commanded NOAH to build an ark (Gen. 6:14-16).
  - a. Up to this time, no rain is recorded to have fallen upon the earth (Gen. 2:5-6).
  - b. But God was grieved by the wickedness of man (Gen. 6:5-6).
  - c. God determined to destroy man from the face of the earth (Gen.6:7).
  - d. But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord (Gen. 6:8).

- e. God's command to Noah to build an ark was based on his decision to destroy "all flesh, wherein *is* the breath of life," by bringing a "flood of waters upon the earth" (Gen. 6:17).
  - f. Rain or no rain, Noah believed God, for, "according to all that God commanded him, so did he" (Gen. 6:22).
  - g. The result of Noah's obedience is recorded in Genesis, Chapters 7 and 8.  
**QUESTION: Whom else did God ever command to build such an ark, other than Noah? Answer: NOBODY ELSE.**
3. God commanded ABRAHAM to offer his son Isaac on an altar as a burnt offering (Gen 22:1-2).
- a. The purpose of this command was to prove Abraham's faith (vv. 1 and 12).
  - b. Abraham, by faith, proceeded to do exactly as God had commanded him, until God was satisfied of his faithfulness and stayed His hand (vv. 3-14).  
**QUESTION: Whom else did God command to offer his son as a burnt offering? Answer: NOBODY ELSE.**

**NOTE: From the foregoing, we see that God's revealed will, during the time of the patriarchs from Adam to Moses, *differed* from one individual and/or family to another.**

## II. THE JEWISH DISPENSATION (Exodus 20 to Acts 2).

- A. Toward the end of the patriarchal period, Abraham's grandson, Jacob, wrestled with an angel one night "until the breaking of the day" (Gen. 32:24-32).
- 1. This angel was unable to prevail against Jacob (v. 25).
  - 2. He touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh, and it went our of joint as they wrestled (v. 25).
  - 3. The angel said, "Let me go, for the day breaketh."
  - 4. Jacob said, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me" (v. 26).
  - 5. The angel said, "What *is* thy name?"
  - 6. And he said, "Jacob" (v. 27).
  - 7. The angel replied, "Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but ISRAEL: "Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed" (v. 28).
  - 8. The angel blessed him (v. 29).
- B. Hundreds of years before this, God had said unto Abraham (then called Abram), "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I WILL MAKE OF THEE A GREAT NATION, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Gen 12:1-3).
- C. By the end of their sojourn in the land of Egypt, several centuries later, Abraham's descendants, now known as the "children of Israel" had, indeed, become "A GREAT NATION."
- 1. The children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty: and the land was filled with them (Exo. 1:7).
  - 2. The Egyptians had become jealous of the children of Israel (i.e., the Jews) and subjected them to bondage and slavery (Exo. 1:8-14).
  - 3. God raised up a mighty leader among the children of Israel, named Moses.
  - 4. After much fruitless contention with the Egyptians, Moses finally led the children of Israel out of bondage into the wilderness of Zin, which was across the Red Sea from Egypt (Exo. 14).

5. In the third month, when the children of Israel were gone forth out of the land of Egypt, they came into the wilderness of Sinai (Exo. 19:1).
  - a. In that wilderness, they camped before a certain mountain (v. 2).
  - b. God called Moses up into the mountain to talk (v. 3).
  - c. God told Moses that *if the children of Israel would obey his voice and keep his covenant*, then he should make them a *peculiar treasure* unto Himself ABOVE ALL PEOPLE (v. 5).
- D. Having chosen the children of Israel to be his “people,” God gave them a special “law” at Mount Sinai (Exo. 20).
  1. This law was unknown to their fathers (Deu. 5:3).
  2. This law (which included *the Ten Commandments*) was made with Israel, i.e., those “brought...out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Exo. 20:2).
  3. This law was binding *only* upon Israel (Deu. 5:104).
  4. It was *not* binding upon the *Gentiles* (Rom. 2:14).
- E. Thus, for the next approximately 1,500 years, God *no longer* dealt with individuals and families, but with the children of Israel, AS A NATION.

**NOTE: This “law,” known variously as “the covenant,” “the law of the Lord,” or “the law of Moses,” thus became a middle wall of partition between Jews and Gentiles. National Israel had the law; Gentile nations had not the law. This arrangement continued from Moses on Sinai to Christ on Pentecost.**

### III. THE CHRISTIAN DISPENSATION.

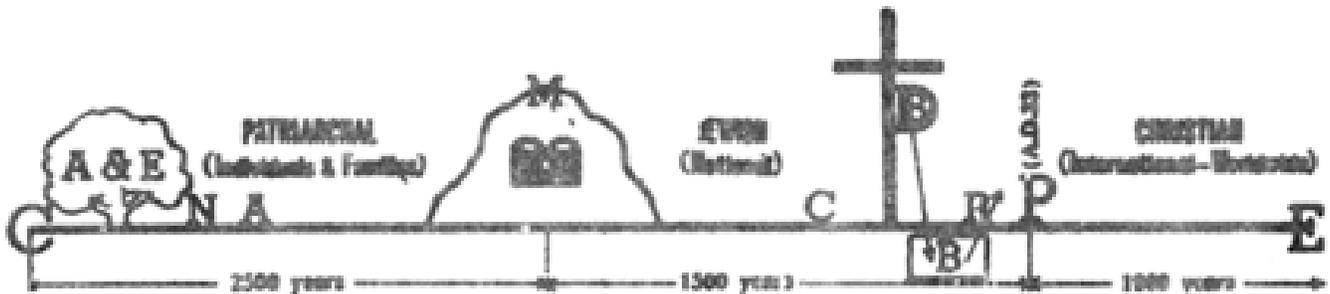
- A. Jesus Christ was born under the law of Moses (Gal. 4:4).
  - B. Jesus did not come to “destroy” the law, but to “fulfill” it (Mat. 5:17-18).
    1. He taught that the law could not pass UNTIL ALL BE FULFILLED (v. 18).
    2. His purpose in coming was to FULFILL the law (v. 17).
    3. Jesus FINISHED the work he came to do (John 17:4).
    4. Hence we see the law passing, *not* by being *destroyed* but by being *fulfilled*.
- NOTE: Some Bible students stumble at this point, not discerning how Jesus could cause the law to pass by fulfillment rather than by destruction. We might illustrate this principle by a contract. Let us say that a builder has a contract with a certain city to build a bridge. There are two possible dispositions he can make of this contract. Either he can *destroy* the contract or he can *fulfill* it. If he *destroys* it, the contract is certainly GONE. But, if he *FULFILLS* it, the contract's NO LESS GONE THAN AS IF HE HAD DESTROYED IT. The difference is not whether the contract is still in force or not, but *how did it pass*—by *destruction* or by *fulfillment*? Even so the law to Israel passed, not by destruction, but by Jesus Christ living up to it perfectly. He thus became the fulfillment of the law. When he was nailed to his cross, the OLD law was nailed there with him, thus opening the way for a NEW law to be established.
- C. All the while Jesus was fulfilling the terms of the OLD law—the law under which he was born—he was announcing the principles and terms of a NEW law, which was to be of force later on.
    1. This NEW law (or testament) could not come into force, while Jesus was first alive upon the earth (Heb. 9:15-17).
  - D. Also the SECOND law could not be established, while the FIRST law remained (Heb. 10:9).
    1. It was necessary, therefore, that the OLD testament (or law), which came by Moses, be nailed to the cross (figuratively speaking, of course), thus clearing the way for the New Testament to come into force.

**NOTE: In our very next lesson, we shall go into this matter exhaustively. It will not do for Christians to think that ANY PART of the OLD law was carried over into the NEW. It was not. Every last “jot” or “tittle” was abrogated at Calvary.**

- E. Jesus sent his Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), thus empowering the apostles to preach the gospel according to the NEW testament, which came into force that same day.
- F. The NEW Testament, from that day forward, WHOLLY SUPPLANTED the OLD Testament (Heb. 10:9).
  - 1. The Jews, who formerly kept the OLD Testament, now were obliged to give it up and accept the NEW Testament.
  - 2. Gentiles, who were EXCLUDED under the OLD Testament, were INCLUDED under the NEW Testament.
- G. The New Testament, thus, became the basis of INTERNATIONAL, or WORLD-WIDE religion (Luke 24:46-47; Mark 16:15-16).
- H. Beginning on Pentecost (A.D. 33), as set forth in Acts 2, it is to remain in force until the end of time (Mat. 28:20).

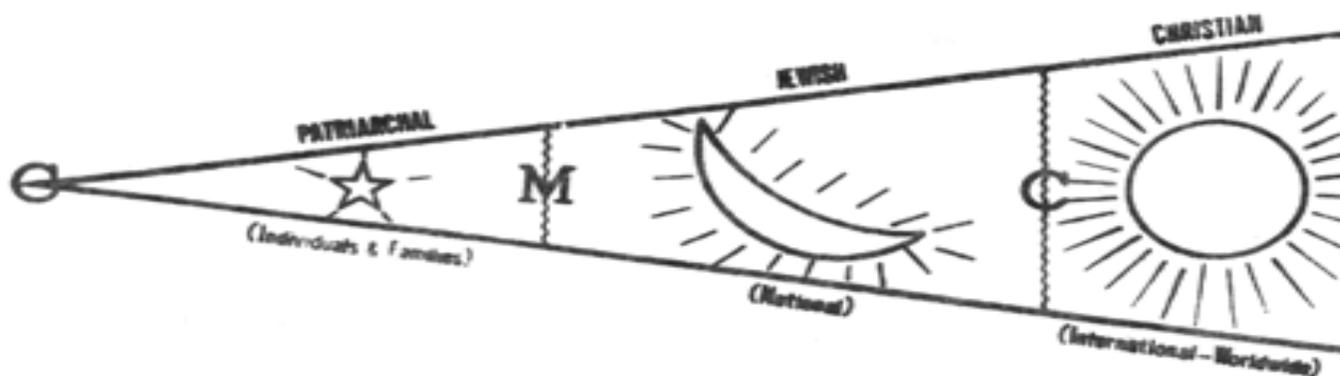
**NOTE: Following are two charts to illustrate the three dispensations:**

**Chart A—**



**EXPLANATION:** The center line from C to E represents the **PASSAGE OF TIME** from **CREATION** to the **END** of the world. The tree with A & E (left) is the **GARDEN OF EDEN**, where **ADAM & EVE** were placed. The mountain with M on top is **MOSES on MOUNT SINAI**, receiving the **LAW**. The next C stands for the **COMING OF CHRIST**; the cross, His **CRUCIFIXION**; the B inside the D is the **BLOOD** He shed in His **DEATH**. The B below is His **BURIAL**; R is His **RESURRECTION** from the dead the third day; and P is for **PENTECOST** 50 days later. From Adam and Eve to Moses on Sinai, a **PATRIARCHAL** type of religion reigned, based on the **FAMILY**, lasting 2,500 years. From Moses to Christ on Pentecost (A.D. 33), the patriarchal system gave way to the **JEWISH** religion, based on the children of Israel as a **NATION**, lasting for 1,500 years. From Christ on Pentecost to the End of time, the **CHRISTIAN** religion supplants the Jewish, is **INTERNATIONAL** in character, world-wide in extent, has already lasted 1,900 years and must continue to the end of the world. A similar explanation also is applicable to Chart B, as follows:

Chart B—



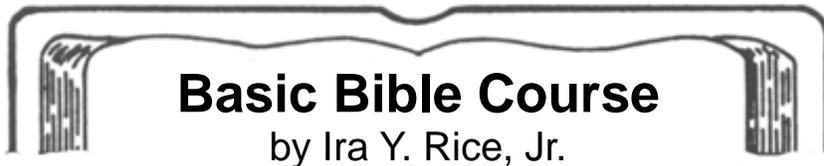
**NOTE:** Although Chart B is largely self-explanatory, let us consider one or two extra thoughts. We have used a STAR in the patriarchal section to denote the tiny bit of “light” God gave to mankind as INDIVIDUALS and FAMILIES during that period...By the time we come to Moses on Sinai, the light of God’s will was greatly increased, as religion was enlarged from family worship to NATIONAL worship—hence we have used the MOON to illustrate this idea...But the starlight of the patriarchs and the moonlight of the Jewish nation (i.e., the Old Testament) could in no wise compare with the sunlight of the CHRISTIAN religion (i.e., the New Testament), whereby Jesus Christ shed his saving grace abroad to ALL MEN EVERYWHERE. Thus we have used the SUN to illustrate the works-wide enlightenment of the CHRISTIAN AGE.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS LESSON to a clear understanding of the Bible cannot be over-emphasized. So many fail to comprehend the Scriptures through failure to recognize they cover THREE DISTINCT and SEPARATE DISPENSATIONS OF RELIGION. God HIMSELF never changes; however, he certainly HAS changed his WILL toward man in DIFFERENT DISPENSATIONS (All the more reason his WORD must be RIGHTLY DIVIDED!).

It is at once apparent to every thoughtful student that the individual commands God gave to individuals and/or families in the FIRST dispensation ended with the ones to whom the commands were given. For example, when Adam and Eve died, no one else having been forbidden to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the command died with them. No one else having been commanded to build an ark, this command died with Noah. No one else having been commanded to offer his son as a burnt offering, this command died with Abraham. So also for the other individual commands of the patriarchal dispensation.

But what of the law God gave through Moses on Sinai: Because that law contained the TEN COMMANDMENTS, a great effort is made by some to show that though the law as a whole died, yet the ten commandments continue. Otherwise, we are asked, where is your MORAL LAW?

In our NEXT lesson—Lesson—we shall show conclusively that NO PART OF THE LAW to Israel continues over into the New Testament, or Christian dispensation A that EVERY BIT OF IT was, in a figure, “NAILED TO THE CROSS.” As long as any of that law continued, the new testament could not come into force. But we’ll save that discussion until NEXT time...For now, please study through the things set forth in Lesson 3; then answer the question for correction and grading.



**The Three Dispensations  
of God's Will to Man**



Questions on Lesson Three

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

REFERENCE NO. \_\_\_\_\_

GRADE \_\_\_\_\_

1. By studying the STAR, can man learn anything about the WILL of God to mankind? \_\_\_\_\_
2. If not, what must we study to know God's WILL to man? \_\_\_\_\_
3. A careful study of the Bible shows it is divided into \_\_\_\_\_ DISPENSATIONS of religion?  
(how many)
4. Name OR identify these dispensations:  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. From Adam to Moses, what religious dispensation was in force? \_\_\_\_\_
6. How did God deal with human beings during this period of religion? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. During the Patriarchal dispensation, did God command the SAME things or DIFFERENT things of every man? Which? \_\_\_\_\_
8. What was the SECOND dispensation of God's will to mankind? \_\_\_\_\_
9. To what **nation** was the law given on Mount Sinai? \_\_\_\_\_
10. Whose name was changed to **Israel**, after he has wrestled with an angel all night? \_\_\_\_\_
11. Was the **law** given on Mount Sinai also given to Israel's fathers? \_\_\_\_\_
12. What **nation** did God make "above all people?" \_\_\_\_\_
13. Was the **law** given on Mount Sinai also binding upon Gentiles? \_\_\_\_\_
14. How many years did the PATRIARCHAL dispensation last? \_\_\_\_\_
15. How many years did the JEWISH dispensation last? \_\_\_\_\_
16. How many years has the CHRISTIAN dispensation lasted so far? \_\_\_\_\_
17. Was Jesus Christ born under the law of Moses? \_\_\_\_\_
18. Concerning the LAW, what was Jesus Christ's PURPOSE in coming? \_\_\_\_\_
19. Could the law pass BEFORE it was fulfilled? \_\_\_\_\_
20. Did Jesus Christ FULFILL the law? \_\_\_\_\_
21. Did the terms of Jesus Christ's NEW testament come into force while he was alive before his death on earth? \_\_\_\_\_

- 22. Did the NEW testament come into force while the FIRST testament was still in force? (Heb. 10:9)  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 23. If the PATRIARCHAL dispensation applied to individuals and families, and the JEWISH dispensation applied to national Israel ONLY, then to whom does the CHRISTIAN dispensation apply? \_\_\_\_\_
- 24. Under what dispensation are we living NOW? \_\_\_\_\_
- 25. When is the CHRISTIAN dispensation to end? \_\_\_\_\_

DO YOU HAVE A QUESTION? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_