

Lesson Ten: Rules of Interpretation - II

A General View of the Bible, Its Two Testaments, Three Dispensations, Major Covenants and Settings

12. **Rightly divide the book, the dispensations, the covenants and the settings.**

The General View of the Entire Bible

1. **The harmony of purpose.** God revealed His will to sinful man so that he may be saved or redeemed.
2. **The harmony of theme.** The history, nature and hope of the grand theme of redemption unites all of the separate books into one Bible. It shapes the design of each book.
3. **The harmony of story.** The coming of Jesus Christ.
4. **The harmony of structure.** Every book is essential to the Bible as a whole. To damage or remove any one would injure the unity.
5. **The harmony of doctrine.** One harmonious flow of teaching exists throughout the Bible. Each law, covenant, commandment, warning, blessing, etc., has its designed place.

The Two Testaments: The Two Main Divisions of the Bible

Old Testament. Five divisions, thirty-nine books.

- **Law:** Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.
- **History:** Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.
- **Poetry:** Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon.
- **Major Prophets:** Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel.
- **Minor Prophets:** Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

New Testament. Four divisions, twenty-seven books.

- **Gospels:** Matthew, Mark, Luke, John.
- **History:** Acts.
- **Epistles:** Romans, I Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, I Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, I Peter, 2 Peter, I John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude.
- **Prophecy:** Revelation.

Chapters and verses have been added to the Bible by man. The chapter divisions were developed by Cardinal Hugo and first appeared in 1250 A.D. The verses of the New Testament were set in order by Sir Robert Stephen in 1551 A.D. It was in the Geneva Bible of 1560 A.D. that verses and chapters were included in a complete Bible for the first time.

The Three Dispensations

1. **The Patriarchal Age.** Its name comes from “father.” God spoke to the fathers through visions, dreams and angels. There was no written law.
2. **The Mosaic Age.** God expanded His method of dealing with mankind from family to nation. The name of this period comes from the lawgiver, Moses. Through him, with the Ten Commandments at its center, God set down a definite written code for social, political, and religious life.
3. **The Gospel Age.** This age has Jesus Christ with all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18). Its chief characteristic is that God turns from family and nation to the whole world. The grand purpose of God is fulfilled through His Son—the redemption of mankind.

The Major Covenants

A covenant is a solemn agreement entered into by two parties in which they are bound together to do things on behalf of each other. In the Biblical use of the term, when referring to the God—man relationship, it means that God takes the leadership as the superior and graciously enters into a relationship with man whereby promises are fulfilled when certain holy conditions are met.

Each covenant is for the man, or men, to whom it was given and for whom it was intended. It belongs to no one else except when extended to them by its author.

One general condition runs through all covenants God has made with mankind—man must believe in, love, and obey God.

Four Essential Parts of a Covenant

1. **The first party.** The covenanter or benefactor.
2. **The second party.** The covenantee or beneficiary.
3. **The conditions that have to be met.**
4. **The promises or blessings to be desired and received after the conditions are met.**

Six Important Covenants

1. The Covenant with Adam.

First party: God. (Genesis 1:28-29; 2:15-16)

Second party: Adam and Eve. (Genesis 1:26-27; 2:16)

Conditions.

- Be fruitful and multiply. (Genesis 1:28)
- Replenish the earth. (Genesis 1:28)
- Subdue the earth and have dominion over every living thing. (Genesis 1:28)
- Dress and keep the garden. (Genesis 2:15)
- Not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (Genesis 2:17)

Promises: Given the garden to live in and every tree and herb for food. (Genesis 1:29; 2:8,9,16)

Mediator: None.

Token: None.

2. The Covenant with Noah Before the Flood.

First party: God. (Genesis 6:13)

Second party: Noah, his wife, their sons and their wives. (Genesis 6:13,18; 7:13)

Conditions.

- Build an ark. (Genesis 6:14-16)
- Enter into the ark with his family. (Genesis 6:18; 7:1)
- Gather a certain number of beasts, fowls, and creeping things. (Genesis 6:19,20; 7:2,3)
- Gather food to eat. (Genesis 6:21)

Promises: Noah's family saved from death. (Genesis 7:21)

Mediator: None.

Token: None.

3. The Covenant with Noah After the Flood.

First party: God. (Genesis 9:8,12)

Second party: Noah and his seed after him. (Genesis 9:8-10)

Conditions.

- Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth. (Genesis 9:1,7)
- Not eat the blood of flesh. (Genesis 9:4)
- Whoever sheds a man's blood, his blood will be shed. (Genesis 9:6)

Promises.

- God will not curse the ground anymore. (Genesis 8:21)
- God will not smite every living thing anymore. (Genesis 8:21)
- The days and seasons will not cease. (Genesis 8:22).
- Man will rule over beasts, fowls, and fish. (Genesis 9:2)
- Every moving thing and every herb can be used for food. (Genesis 9:3)
- The earth would never be destroyed by flood. (Genesis 9:11)

Mediator: None.

Token: God set the bow in the cloud. (Genesis 9:12-17)

4. The Covenant with Abraham.

First party: God. (Genesis 12:1; 17:1-3)

Second party: Abraham and his seed to follow in all generations. (Genesis 17:7)

Conditions.

- Go out of his country and into a new land God would show him. (Genesis 12:1)
- Walk before God and be perfect. (Genesis 17:1)
- Offer his son, Isaac, for a burnt offering. (Genesis 22:2)

Promises.

- God would make of Abraham a great nation. (Genesis 12:2)
- God would bless him and make his name great. (Genesis 12:2)
- God would bless those who would bless him and curse those who would curse him. (Genesis 12:3)
- God would bless all families of the earth through him. (Genesis 12:3; 22:18)
- The land of Canaan would be given to his seed. (Genesis 12:7)
- His seed would be in number as the dust of the earth. (Genesis 13:16)
- He would have a son. (Genesis 15:4)
- He would be the father of many nations. (Genesis 17:4)
- God would be a God to him and his seed. (Genesis 17:7)
- God would give his seed Egypt in which to sojourn. (Genesis 26:1-5)
- God would return his seed to the Promised Land. (Genesis 28:10-15)

Mediator: None.

Token: Circumcision. (Genesis 17:10-14)

5. The Law.

First party: God. (Exodus 20:1)

Second party: All Israel. (Exodus 34:27; Deuteronomy 5:1-3)

Conditions. The Ten Commandments plus all the statutes and judgments pertaining to private, social (or political), and religious life. (Exodus 20 through Deuteronomy)

Promises.

- Israel would be a peculiar and holy nation. (Exodus 19:5-6)
- According to Leviticus 26, God would give:
 - Good harvests and ample food.
 - Safety and peace.
 - Deliverance from evil beasts.
 - Protection from and power over enemies.
 - Respect.
 - Growth in number.
 - His presence.

Mediator: Moses. (Deuteronomy 5:5)

Token: The Sabbath. (Exodus 31:12-17; Ezekiel 20:12,20)

6. The Gospel.

First party: God. (Romans 1:1,16; Hebrews 1:1-2)

Second party: All the world. (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15-16)

Conditions.

- Hear the gospel. (Romans 10:13-14; 1 Corinthians 15:1)
- Believe in Jesus Christ. (Mark 16:15-16; John 20:30-31; Acts 8:36-37; 16:31; Romans 10:13-14; 1 Corinthians 1:21; Hebrews 11:6).
- Repent of sin. (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; 17:30)
- Confess faith in Jesus Christ. (Acts 8:37; Romans 10:10; Philippians 2:11)
- Be baptized into Christ. (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 8:36-39; 9:18; 22:16; Galatians 3:27)
- Continue to grow in holiness as a Christian (Matthew 28:20; 2 Corinthians 7:1; 1 Peter 2:1-3; 2 Peter 1:5-11) by worshiping the Lord (Acts 2:42; Hebrews 10:24-26); by teaching all men (Matthew 28:19; Acts 8:1-3,29,35; Colossians 3:16); by being a good steward of all life (1 Corinthians 4:1,2; 6:19-20; 16:2; 1 Peter 4:10); and remaining faithful unto death (Revelation 2:10).

Promises.

- Forgiveness. (Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14)
- Election. (Romans 8:33)
- Redemption. (Romans 3:23-26)
- Justification. (Romans 8:1,30-31)
- Grace. (Ephesians 2:8-9; 2 Timothy 2:1)
- Salvation. (2 Timothy 2:10)
- Hope. (1 Thessalonians 1:3)
- Peace. (1 Peter 5:14)
- Wisdom. (James 1:5)
- Protection and help. (1 Corinthians 10:13; Philippians 4:19)
- Righteousness. (Romans 3:21-22; 5:17)
- Inheritance. (Galatians 3:26-29)
- Rest. (Revelation 14:13)

- Victory. (2 Corinthians 2:14)
- Glory. (2 Timothy 2:10)
- Eternal life. (Romans 6:23; 1 John 5:11)

Mediator: Jesus Christ. (1 Timothy 2:5)

Token: Gift of the Holy Spirit. (2 Corinthians 1:22; Galatians 5:22-25; Ephesians 1:13; 4:30)

The Importance of Setting

One must be very careful to keep a passage in the setting in which it was first given. It must be put in its rightful place according to the period of time and the covenant involved. One must take an historical approach to Bible study to be fully aware of the entire setting of a passage in which the Holy Spirit first placed it.

Some things to consider in the setting include:

- Who is speaking or writing?
- To whom?
 - What is their history?
 - What about their education?
 - What were their customs?
 - To which sins had they been addicted?
 - To what temptations were they subject?
- About whom?
- When was it spoken (or written)?
- Where was it spoken (or written)?
- What were the circumstances?
- Why? What is the purpose or aim?

Questions for Review and Discussion

1. What are some contributing factors to the harmony of doctrine seen in the Bible?
2. Tell why you believe God divided His dealings with mankind into different dispensational periods?
3. What is a covenant?
4. What are the essential elements of a covenant?
5. What does a mediator of a covenant do?
6. What has a "token" to do with a covenant?
7. What bearing do the following covenants have on mankind today?
 - a. God's covenant with Abraham.
 - b. The Law.
 - c. The Gospel.
8. What is setting? Why is it important in understanding Scripture?