

GOD'S PLAN FOR THE AGES

A Comprehensive View of God's Great Plan from
Eternity to Eternity Illustrated with Chart

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CHAPTER THREE

THE AGE OF CONSCIENCE

As we begin our third study in the series on "*God's Plan of the Ages*," let us look carefully at the chart, entitled "From Creation to Re-Creation," which accompanies these Bible lessons. Here we see set forth the fact that in the past eternity there existed the eternal God, the eternal Son, the eternal Spirit, and the eternal purpose. These only have had no beginning and shall have no end.

On our chart we see also the diagrams representing:

- (1) The original creation which, according to the Scripture, seems to have been the dominion of Lucifer before his fall;
- (2) the chaos of this earth which possibly resulted from the fall of Lucifer, who became Satan when he defied God and attempted to be worshipped as God; and
- (3) the renovation of the chaotic earth, which took place during the six days referred to in the first chapter of Genesis and which left Adam and Eve in a state of innocence in the Garden of Eden.

In our last study we considered in some detail the condition of man in his original state, his fall, and God's first promise of a Redeemer. We found that in the Garden of Eden man did not know good from evil; but that after sin entered, he was no longer innocent.

Today we shall see that, with the entrance of sin, fallen man knew good from wrong. In other words, we are to consider in this lesson that period of time which we call "The Age of Conscience," extending from the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden to the flood that came upon the earth in the days of Noah.

Why the Dispensations?

From the creation of man, God has passed him through different ages or "dispensations," or administrations.

The word “**dispensation**” is a Biblical term. (See Ephesians 3:2; 1:10; cf. I Corinthians 9:17; Colossians 1:25).

It simply means a period of time during which God deals with man according to a certain plan. Thus God has given man trial after trial. Each time man has failed to measure up to God's standard; and each time God in His patience and longsuffering has given him a new trial. For example, man innocent in the Garden of Eden failed; then God gave him another trial under conscience.

As we shall see, man failed here too, with the result that this age or dispensation ended with corruption in all the earth in the days of Noah.

And so on throughout the Word of God we see age after age ending with sin and failure on the part of fallen man. Each time we see also God's judgment of sin. At the close of the age of innocence man was expelled from the Garden of Eden and the whole creation was under the curse. At the close of the age of conscience God sent the flood, in order to judge sin and in order to give man a fresh start, as it were.

As we follow this series of studies, we shall see how every age continues along this same course: a new beginning, sin, failure, judgment; a new beginning, sin, failure, judgment.

But you ask: Why does God pass man through these different dispensations? Does He not know the outcome before He brings it to pass?

Yes, my friend, God knows the end from the beginning. But He passes man through these different testings in order to show man that, no matter what his environment, no matter what his circumstances, he cannot make himself fit for heaven and the presence of God.

You could not find a better environment than Eden! You could not find an ancestry more pure, according to the law of eugenics, than that of the descendants of Abraham, separated as they were from the things that defile — in so far as they obeyed the Law of Moses. God has tried out all the methods that man has ever proposed as a means for the betterment of the human race; and God has done this to show man his need of a Saviour.

God knew from the beginning the utter inability of man to recover himself; but man is slow to learn his own sin and weakness and need. Therefore, all these trials of man under different circumstances in Old Testament times were given in order to prepare him for the coming into the world of a Redeemer, Christ Jesus, the Lord.

Man, independent of God, has ever sought self-reformation; but everything he has conceived for the solution of the world's needs, its sin, its crime, its problems, its sorrows — everything has failed. Man needs a Saviour! And God has from the beginning tried to show him that only by faith in the shed blood of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, can he ever hope for heaven and eternity with Him. How patient is God! And it is His patience that has made Him give man trial after trial, even though failure after failure followed each new beginning.

It is important to remember that today man is no longer under trial. Man's trial is past, with what results? The verdict is: “**All the world . . . guilty before God**” (Romans 3:19). But thanks be unto Him! He has provided a way of escape from the awful penalty of guilt and sin; for He Himself has borne the iniquity of us all!

Let us look now at our chart once more. Here the different dispensations are indicated by circles or semi-circles. Ordinarily they are classified as follows, according to seven periods, seven being the perfect number:

- (1) Innocence;
- (2) Conscience;
- (3) Human Government;
- (4) Promise (from Abraham to Sinai);
- (5) Law (from Sinai to Christ);
- (6) Grace;
- (7) Millennium, or the thousand years' reign of Christ on earth.

On our chart, however, we have chosen to consider the period of time from Abraham to Sinai as a preface to the Law of Moses, and therefore have classified this whole period as the Age of Law.

If you distinguish these dispensations as the Bible divides them, at the same time keeping within scriptural grounds, you will have no difficulty in understanding the Word of God as a whole, as well as in its detail.

In II Timothy 2:15 the Holy Spirit exhorts every Christian, saying: “**Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.**”

And before we can intelligently and rightly divide the Word of truth, we must get a grasp of God's great plan of the ages. Then only shall we be able to understand the Bible in detail.

Man's Ruin — God's Deliverance

The Age of Conscience began with Adam outside the Garden of Eden and ended with the flood, covering a period of some 1,656 years. Through disobedience to God, through believing Satan rather than God, man had received the knowledge of good and evil. Innocence is ignorance of evil; now man was no longer innocent.

During this new trial under conscience man was left to his own choice between good and evil.

There was no law from God in this age, no government. God tested man by letting him go in his own way, leaving him to do that which was right in his own eyes. No man had authority over other men — and this age ended with unspeakable corruption, as described in Genesis 6:5, 11, 12:

“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 . . . The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence . . . for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth.”

During the Age of Conscience God thus proved to man that always, if left to his own choice between right and wrong, nothing but failure can result. And yet many today would have us return to such a scheme of things. Many are advocating Communism, Socialism, free love, no restraint. But if all restraint were removed today, the same thing would happen that took place in the days before the flood; the unregenerate heart does not change.

God tested man under conscience to show to man his guilt. The age ended in sin, rebellion against God, and hatred of God. But even as God proved to man his sin, He also offered to him a Redeemer!

Again and again, by the different tests through which He let man go through, He showed him his utter ruin and inability to save himself; and side by side with this object lesson, He gave the promise of a Saviour.

These two fundamental facts are indicated on our chart:

(1) Man's inability to save himself is seen in the ever-increasing evidences of his corruption and degeneration as each age goes on, ending in the final rejection of Christ by a world that refused God's only plan of redemption at Calvary's Cross; and

(2) side by side with this line of degeneration, side by side with the development of sin in the earth, we see also the line of sacrifice.

This line of sacrifice began, as we saw in our last lesson, with God's first promise of a Redeemer in the Garden of Eden, after man sinned. And from Genesis 3:15 on, throughout the whole of the Old Testament, God promised a Saviour, His own Son and our Redeemer.

Through plain prophecy, and through shadow and type, God set forth the only way of escape from the condemnation of sin — and that way is the way of the cross, by faith in the sacrifice of **“the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world”** (John 1:29).

In Old Testament times God was painting a portrait, as it were, the outline of which became more and more distinct with each stroke of the Master Artist's pen. Every animal sacrifice was but a shadow of the cross. God sent His prophets also to foretell the coming of a Saviour. **“And last of all he sent . . . his Son”** (cf. Matthew 21:37).

My brother, have you taken Him as your own personal Saviour and Lord? God has proved to you that you cannot save yourself by reformation or by your own good works. **“Without shedding of blood is no remission,”** no forgiveness of sin. (See Hebrews 9:22).

The Days of Noah — A Shadow of the Last Days

The conditions that existed before the flood have a special significance to the student of prophecy; for the Lord Jesus Himself cast His all-seeing eye down the centuries and uttered those striking words:

“As the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be” (Matthew 24:37-39).

“As the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.”

Let me ask you, my friend, how can you reconcile the statement many are making today, saying that the world is getting better and better, with this plain declaration of the Lord Jesus Himself? He said, **“As the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.”** In the days of Noah there existed corruption, violence, sin! And these same circumstances will characterize the earth just prior to the Lord's return.

Just before the last war philosophists heralded the golden age. They said that by the process of science and invention, by the process of evolution and development, the world was getting better and better — that eventually a veritable millennium would come in the earth. But, my brother, the darkest period of the world's history is yet future. Before the Lord Jesus went to the cross, His disciples asked Him, saying, **“What shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world [age]?”** (See Matthew 24:3). And among other things in the highly significant discourse that fell from the lips of the Lord in answer to this question, is the plain statement: **“As the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.”**

It is a solemn fact, one that we dare not overlook, that the same conditions that characterized the days of Noah are decidedly in evidence today.

At least a five-fold analogy can be drawn between the days just before the flood and our own time.

Surely the return of Christ must be very near, even at the doors! It is a solemn fact that the unsaved man must face: but it is a **“blessed hope”** to the redeemed child of God to know that, before He returns in judgment, His church will be translated, caught away, forever to be with Him. To which class do you belong, my friend?

1. The Breaking Down of Barriers.

If you will read carefully the first thirteen verses of the sixth chapter of Genesis, you will see this five-fold analogy between the days of Noah and the time just prior to the return of Christ, the first characteristic of which might be called *“the breaking down of barriers.”*

Verses 1,2, and 4 of this chapter are very significant:

“And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose . . . There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown.”

Some Bible teachers believe that there is a great mystery associated with this passage. They think that **“the sons of God”** were angels, and that the **“giants”** referred to were a race, part spirit-being and part human-being. I have not been able to satisfy myself with this interpretation. Rather, I am inclined to believe that **“the sons of God”** refer to the godly line of Seth; the **“daughters of men,”** to the ungodly line of Cain.

Now God has always told His people to be separated from the Christ-rejecting world. He told His people Israel not to intermarry with the heathen nations around them. He tells His blood-bought church to be **“not unequally yoked together with unbelievers,”** to **“come out from among them, and be . . . separate”** (II Corinthians 6:14-17). And it was displeasing to Him when the children of Seth, the godly line, intermarried with the children of Cain, those who had turned their backs upon Him. Herein was a breaking down of a divinely ordained barrier, the barrier of separation.

Let me ask you, my friend, is there not a breaking down of barriers today? Do we see very much difference between the manner of life of multitudes of professing Christians and those who make no profession whatever?

It is Satan's business to break down every barrier between the church and this world; whereas God says very plainly:

“Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed” (Romans 12:2)

Early in the Christian era the disciples preached in the words of the Lord Jesus, saying: **“Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God”** (John 3:5).

Today on every hand we hear **“blind leaders of the blind”** proclaiming a false hope, teaching the universal Fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man, omitting all reference to the plain teaching of the Word of God: **“Ye must be born again!”**

In the days of Noah all mankind had corrupted his way on the earth, and only of Noah could it be said that he **“was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God”** (Genesis 6:9).

Noah and his family were the only separated ones; and they alone found safety from the waters of judgment in the ark.

Likewise, today God has His faithful band of true believers, separated from the world which is dominated by Satan; and these have found the only place of safety from coming judgment, for they are sheltered beneath the blood, safe in the ark, as it were, which speaks to us of the Lord Jesus Christ. My Christian friend, remember! Our God wants a separated church, not united in unholy wedlock with the Christ-rejecting world. But be not discouraged. **“As the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.”** The return of our Lord seems to be very near!

2. God's Judgment of Sin Postponed.

In Noah's day the Lord said: **“My Spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years”** (Genesis 6:3).

God pronounced judgment on the corrupt generation of Noah's time; then, as this verse clearly indicates, He postponed that judgment one-hundred and twenty years. Why? Because He is a God of grace, and He wanted to give those wicked men an opportunity to turn from their sin and be saved.

Peter tells us that Noah was a **“preacher of righteousness”** (II Peter 2:5). And in Hebrews 11:7 we read: **“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; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith.”**

These words from the New Testament seem to indicate clearly that Noah by his very act of building the ark was preaching righteousness to his generation. And certain it is that through him God gave warning of judgment to come. Certain it is also that the unbelieving men of Noah's day were condemned because they would not heed the warning he sounded.

Nearly two thousand years ago the Lord Jesus pronounced judgment to come; for He said: **“Now is the judgment of this world; now shall the prince of this world be cast out”** (John 12:31).

He promised also to return, not only to judge sin, but also to set up His kingdom, **“wherein dwelleth righteousness.”**

Nearly two thousand years have passed since then. Has He forgotten His Word? No, He is the God of grace! He **“is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to usward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”** And **“with him one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.”** (See II Peter 3:8, 9).

Because of His longsuffering and patience with sinful man, this church age is called the Age of Grace. But the judgment He pronounced will one day fall upon unbelieving man; and as in the days of Noah the flood came **“and took them all away,”** so also when Jesus returns to purify the earth and to set up His kingdom, the wicked shall be taken away into everlasting punishment because of their unbelief, because they would not take warning and enter the ark of safety, even the shelter beneath the blood of our crucified and risen Lord.

3. Corruption and Moral Degeneracy.

Read again the first thirteen verses of the sixth chapter of Genesis, noting the frequent use of such words as “**corrupt**,” “**violence**,” “**wickedness**,” “**evil**.”

“And 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 . . . The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth” (Genesis 6:5, 11, 12).

Then compare these verses with the words of the Lord Jesus, as recorded in Matthew 24:38, 39:

“As in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so also shall the coming of the Son of man be.”

And now note once more these words: **“The sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose”** (Genesis 6:2).

“They took them wives of all which they chose.” Does that not sound like polygamy? Moreover, the Greek for the words of the Lord, **“They were . . . marrying and giving in marriage,”** suggests rather this thought: *“They were exchanging wives.”*

All this is a dark picture of corruption and moral degeneracy that polluted the earth, making it necessary for God to purify it with the waters of judgment — to give man a fresh start, a new environment, another trial. And let me ask you, my friend, is this not a picture of conditions in the world today? Are men not taking them wives of all which they choose? Are they not exchanging wives?

Twenty-six per cent of all the marriages in this country end in divorce. I know that there is a scriptural ground for divorce; and many unsuspecting souls are the victims of the divorce evil, yet with no fault of their own. But what of the hundreds and thousands who lightly, flippantly enter upon this divine ordinance, and as lightly and flippantly break these ties, even in the face of the words of Christ: **“What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder”?** (See Matthew 19:6). **“As the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.”**

“The earth was filled with violence” in the days of Noah.

What of the crime and lawlessness of our own day? What of the letting down of moral standards? Even unconverted men are sounding a warning to our country today. We are producing a type of criminal that did not exist twenty-five or thirty years ago. Kidnappers of babies, murderers, and bandits are on the increase. Human life is cheap.

But God foretold that this should be as the age draws to a close. Surely we are living in the last days of the dispensation of grace! Surely the return of Christ is at hand!

4. *“Wicked Men . . . Said unto God, Depart from Us” (Job 22:15-17).*

These terrible words were spoken by the men in the days of Noah, before the flood; for the Holy Spirit wrote of them in the book of Job, saying: **“Hast thou marked the old way which wicked men have trodden? Which were cut down out of time, whose foundation was overflowed with a flood: which said unto God, Depart from us?”**

They did not want to know God. They defied Him. Is it any wonder that He gave them up? Yet we see this condition in many parts of the world today. Even nations are saying unto God, **“Depart from us.”** Never was it so since the days of Noah. **“And as the days of Noah were, so also shall the coming of the Son of man be.”**

In our own generation, both Russia and Germany have sought to get rid of Christ and the Bible. Many startling facts have been given out from reliable sources, signifying audacity of these countries in their defiance of the Lord of heaven and earth. I wonder at the patience of God! But He is **“longsuffering to usward, not willing that any should perish.”**

The day will come when the cup of iniquity will be full. Judgment will overtake any individual or any nation that leaves God out. What is your relationship to the living God, my brother? He is a God of mercy, but He is also a God of justice.

5. *A High Form of Civilization.*

In the days of Noah **“there were giants in the earth . . . mighty men . . . men of renown”** (Genesis 6:4).

Archeology bears out the truth of this statement, giving evidence of a high form of civilization before the flood. There are men of renown in the world today, but the problems of the world are still unsolved. Think of all that science and invention have done! You are sitting at your radio, in many different localities of Southern California, listening to my voice, and that without the aid of a wire. What a marvelous day this is! And yet the civilizations of the days of Noah, of the Babylonians and of the Greeks, developed as they were, have been long covered by the ashes of the earth because they forgot God.

Doubtless the **“giants”** of the days before the flood were giants intellectually, as well as physically. Likewise, we have intellectual giants in the world today. And yet we stand helpless in the face of the onrush of crime and lawlessness and violence. Noah preached righteousness in his day, but did men believe him when he said that God was going to send a flood? Do men believe us today when we tell them the Word of God, that He is coming again to purify the earth and to establish His kingdom? Thank God, there are many who heed His warning, but there are millions more who laugh to scorn such a possibility. **“As the days of Noah were, so also shall the coming of the Son of man be.”**

“That Blessed Hope”

To you, my Christian friend, I would add a word of hope and assurance before we bring this study to a close.

Look at your Bible once more, and you will see that before the flood came upon the earth, **“Enoch . . . was not; for God took him”** (Genesis 5:24).

In Hebrews 11:5 we read: **“By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God.”**

Enoch is a type of the church, the bride of Christ, which will be translated before the purifying judgments sweep the earth at the end of this age. Noah and his family represent the Jewish remnant that will pass through the great tribulation and be preserved in it. But you, Christians, all who love the Lord Jesus and have put your faith in His atoning work on Calvary — you will be translated before that time of tribulation comes upon the earth, as we shall see in our later studies.

At this time suffice it to say that the **“blessed hope”** of the Lord's return is to the Christian a precious promise, sure and steadfast.

But there are millions in the world today who are not members of the body of Christ. What of them? Do we care for their souls? Do you care for your own soul, my unsaved brother? Jesus is coming again. He is coming in judgment upon the ungodly. Will you enter the ark of safety before it is too late? **“Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.”**

Behold His love for you; accept His pardon; and be saved.

His own voice speaks to you today, saying: **“He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation [judgment]; but is passed from death unto life”** (John 5:24).

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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