

STUDY IV

THE EPOCHS AND DISPENSATIONS MARKED IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DIVINE PLAN

God's Plan Definite and Systematic--Three Great Epochs of the World's History--Their Distinctive Features--"The Earth Abideth Forever"--The World to Come, the New Heavens and Earth--Subdivisions of These Great Epochs--The Important Features of God's Plan thus Brought to View--Order Recognized Discloses Harmony--Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth.

AS SOME ignorantly misjudge the skill and wisdom of a great architect and builder by his unfinished work, so also many in their ignorance now misjudge God by his unfinished work; but by and by, when the rough scaffolding of evil, which has been permitted for man's discipline, and which shall finally be overruled for his good, has been removed, and the rubbish cleared away, God's *finished work* will universally declare his infinite wisdom and power; and his plans will be seen to be in harmony with his glorious character.

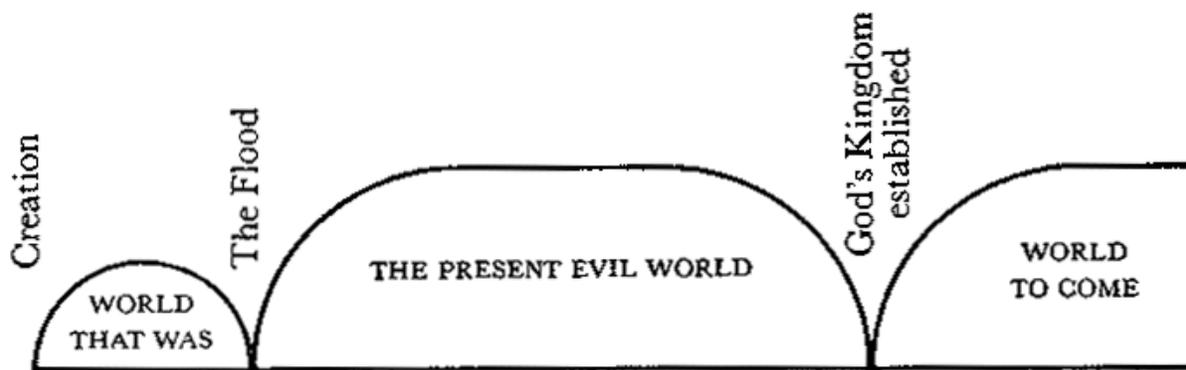
Since God tells us that he has a definitely fixed purpose, and that all his purposes shall be accomplished, it behooves us, as his children, to inquire diligently what those plans are, that we may be found in harmony with them. Notice how emphatically Jehovah affirms the fixedness of his purpose: "Jehovah of hosts hath sworn, saying, Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it be." "The Lord of hosts hath purposed, and who shall disannul it?" "I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me,...My counsel shall stand,

and I will do all my pleasure:...Yea, I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it." (*Isa. 14:24-27; 46:9-11*) Therefore, however haphazard or

mysterious God's dealings with men may appear, those who believe this testimony of his Word must acknowledge that his original and unalterable plan has been, and still is, progressing systematically to completion.

While the mass of mankind, groping in the darkness of ignorance, must await the actual developments of God's plan, before they can realize the glorious character of the Divine Architect, it is the privilege of the child of God to see by faith and the light of his lamp the foretold glories of the future, and thereby to appreciate the otherwise mysterious dealings of the past and the present. Therefore, as interested sons of God, and heirs of a promised inheritance, we apply to our Father's Word, that we may understand his purposes from the plans and specifications therein given. There we learn that the plan of God, with reference to man, spans three great periods of time, beginning with man's creation and reaching into the illimitable future. Peter and Paul designate these periods "three worlds," which we represent in the following diagram.

Great Epochs Called "Worlds"



Great Epochs Called "Worlds"

Creation

WORLD THAT WAS

The Flood

THE PRESENT EVIL WORLD

God's Kingdom established

WORLD TO COME

These three great epochs represent three distinct manifestations of divine providence. The first, from creation to

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the flood, was under the ministration of angels, and is called by Peter "THE WORLD THAT WAS." *2 Pet. 3:6*

The second great epoch, from the flood to the establishment of the kingdom of God, is under the limited control of Satan, "the prince of this world," and is therefore called "THIS PRESENT EVIL WORLD." *Gal. 1:4; 2 Pet. 3:7*

The third is to be a "world without end" (*Isa. 45:17*) under divine administration, the kingdom of God, and is called "THE WORLD TO COME--wherein dwelleth righteousness." *Heb. 2:5; 2 Pet. 3:13*

The first of these periods, or "worlds," under the ministration of angels, was a failure; the second, under the rule of Satan, the usurper, has been indeed an "evil world"; but the third will be an era of righteousness and of blessing to all the families of the earth.

The last two of these "worlds" are most particularly mentioned, and the statements relative to them are in strong contrast. The present, or second period, is called "the present evil world," not because there is nothing good in it, but because in it evil is permitted to predominate. "Now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered." (*Mal. 3:15*) The third world or epoch is mentioned as "THE WORLD TO COME--wherein dwelleth righteousness," not because there will be no evil in it, but because evil will not predominate. The blotting out of evil will be gradual, requiring all of the first thousand years. Evil will not rule then; it will not prosper; it will no longer be the wicked that will flourish; but "the righteous shall flourish" (*Psa. 72:7*), the "obedient shall eat the good of the land" (*Isa. 1:19*), and "the evil doer shall be cut off." *Psa. 37:9*

Thus seen, the next dispensation is to be so dissimilar as to be the very reverse of the present one in almost every particular. Our Lord's words show why there is to be a

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difference between the present and the future dispensations. It is because he will be the prince or ruler of the world to come, that in it righteousness and truth will prosper; while, because Satan is the prince (ruler) of the present

evil world, evil prospers and the wicked flourish. It is because, as Jesus said, the prince of this world "hath nothing in me"--and consequently no interest in his followers except to oppose, tempt, annoy and buffet them (**John 14:30; 2 Cor. 12:7**)--that in this present evil world or epoch, whosoever will live godly shall suffer persecution, while the wicked flourish like a green bay tree. **2 Tim. 3:12; Psa. 37:35**

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world," and until the era or "world to come" *does come*, Christ's kingdom will not control the earth. And for this we are taught to hope and pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth." Satan is the "ruler of the darkness of this world," and therefore "darkness covers the earth and gross darkness the people." He now rules and works in the hearts of the children of disobedience. **Eph. 2:2; 6:12**

There must be some very important part of the great Architect's plan for man's salvation not yet fully developed--else the new prince and the new dispensation would have been long ago introduced. Why it was postponed for an appointed time, and also the manner of the change from the present dominion of evil under Satan to that of righteousness under Christ, are points of interest which will be more fully shown hereafter. Suffice it now to say, that the kingdoms of this world, now subject to Satan, are at the proper time to become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ. (**Rev. 11:15**) The context shows that the transfer will be accomplished by a general time of trouble. In reference to it Jesus said, "No man can enter into a strong man's house and spoil his goods, except he will first bind the

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strong man, and then he will spoil his house." (**Mark 3:22-27**) Thus we are taught that Satan must first be bound, restrained and deposed, before Christ's reign of righteousness and peace can be established. This binding of Satan is accordingly shown to be the first work of the new dispensation.

Rev. 20:2

It should be remembered that this earth is the basis of all these "worlds" and dispensations, and that though ages pass and dispensations change, still the earth continues--"The earth abideth forever." (**Eccl. 1:4**) Carrying out the same figure, Peter calls each of these periods a separate heavens and earth. Here the word *heavens* symbolizes the higher or spiritual controlling powers, and *earth* symbolizes human government and social arrangements. Thus the first

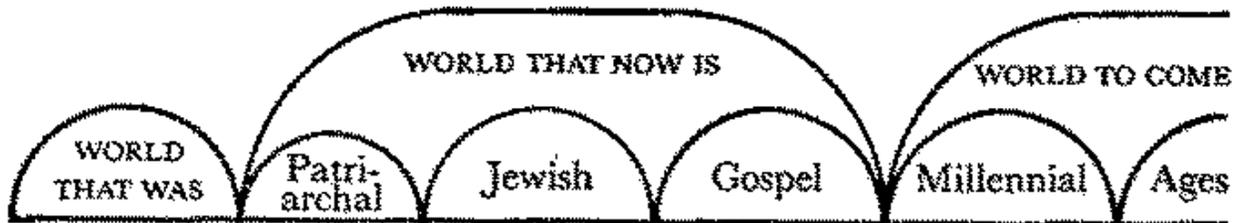
heavens and earth, or the order and arrangement of things then existing, having served their purpose, ended at the flood. But the physical heavens (sky and atmosphere), and the physical earth, did not pass away: they remained. So likewise the present world (heavens and earth) will pass away with a great noise, fire and melting--confusion, trouble and dissolution. The strong man (Satan), being bound, will struggle to retain his power. The present order or arrangement of government and society, not that of the physical sky and earth, will pass away. The present *heavens* (powers of spiritual control) must give place to the "new heavens"--Christ's spiritual control. The present *earth* (human society as now organized under Satan's control) must (symbolically) melt and be dissolved, in the beginning of the "Day of the Lord," which "shall burn as an oven." (*Mal. 4:1*) It will be succeeded by "a new earth," i.e., society reorganized in harmony with earth's new Prince--Christ. Righteousness, peace and love will rule among men when present arrangements have given place to the new and better kingdom, the basis of which will be the strictest justice.

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Paul was given a glimpse of the next dispensation, or, as he calls it, "the world to come." He says he was "caught away" (physically or mentally, or both, he could not tell, things were so real to his view) down the stream of time to the new condition of things, the "new heaven," hence the "third heaven." He thus saw things as they will be under the spiritual control of Christ, things which he might not disclose. (*2 Cor. 12:2-4*) Doubtless these were the same things which John afterward saw, and was permitted to express to the Church in *symbols*, which may only be understood as they become due. John, in the revelation given to him by our Lord on the Isle of Patmos, was in vision carried down through this Christian Age and its changing scenes of church and state, to the end of the present evil world, or epoch, and there in prophetic visions he saw Satan bound, Christ reigning, and the new heaven and the new earth established; for the former heaven and earth were passed away. *Rev. 21:1*

Ages or Dispensations

We now notice the ages into which these great epochs are subdivided, as illustrated in the diagram below.



WORLD THAT WAS

WORLD THAT NOW IS

Patriarchal Jewish Gospel

WORLD TO COME

Millennial Ages

The first of these great epochs ("worlds") was not subdivided: God's method of dealing with men did not vary during all that time--from Adam's fall to the flood. God had given man his law, written in his very nature; but after he had sinned he left him measurably to his own course, which was downward, "evil, and that continually," that thus man

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might realize his folly, and that the wisdom of God in commanding absolute obedience might be made manifest.

That dispensation ended with a flood, which took away all but faithful Noah and his family. Thus the first dispensation not only manifested the disastrous effects of sin, but showed that the tendency of sin is downward to greater degradation and misery, and proves the necessity of Jehovah's interposition, if the recovery of "that which was lost"--man's first estate--is ever to be accomplished.

The second epoch, or "world that now is," includes three ages, each a step in the plan of God for the overthrow of evil. Each step is higher than that preceding it, and carries

the plan forward and nearer to completion.

The third great epoch--"the world to come"--future from the second advent of Christ, comprises the Millennial Age, or "times of restitution"; and following it are other "ages to come," the particulars of which are not revealed. Present revelations treat of man's recovery from sin, and not of the eternity of glory to follow.

The first age in the "world that now is" we call the PATRIARCHAL AGE, or dispensation, because during that period God's dealings and favors were with a few individuals only, the remainder of mankind being almost ignored. Such favored ones were the patriarchs Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Each of these in turn seems to have been God's favored one. At the death of Jacob, that age or order of dealing ended. At Jacob's death, his descendants were first called "the twelve tribes of Israel," and were together recognized of God as his "peculiar people"; and through typical sacrifices they were typically "a holy nation," separated from other nations for a particular purpose, and therefore to enjoy certain special favors. The time allotted to this feature of the divine plan, beginning here and ending at the death of Christ, we designate the JEWISH AGE, or the Law

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dispensation. During that age God specially blessed that nation. He gave them his law; he made a special covenant with them; he gave them the Tabernacle, whose shekinah glory in the Most Holy represented Jehovah's presence with them as their Leader and King. To them he sent the prophets, and finally his Son. Jesus performed his miracles and taught in their midst, and would neither go to others himself, nor permit his disciples to go to the surrounding nations. He sent them out, saying, "Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not; but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (*Matt. 10:5,6*) And again he said, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (*Matt. 15:24*) That this national favor ended with their rejection and crucifixion of Jesus is shown by Jesus' words, when, five days before his crucifixion, he declared, "Your house is left unto you desolate." *Matt. 23:38*

There, at Jesus' death, a new age began--the CHRISTIAN AGE or GOSPEL DISPENSATION, wherein should be heralded good tidings of justification, not to the Jew only, but to all nations; for Jesus Christ, by the grace of God, tasted death for every man. During this Gospel age also there is a class

called to special favor, to whom special promises are made; namely, those who by faith accept Christ Jesus as their Redeemer and Lord, following in his footsteps. The gospel proclamation has gone hither and thither through the earth for nearly nineteen hundred years, so that it can now be said that it has been preached more or less in *every nation*. It has not converted nations--it was not designed to do so in this age; but it has selected here and there some, in all a "little flock," as Jesus had foretold (**Luke 12:32**), to whom it is the Father's good pleasure to give the Kingdom in an age to follow this.

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With this age the "present evil world" ends; and mark well that while God has been thus permitting the predominance and reign of evil, to the seeming detriment of his cause, nevertheless his deep designs have been steadily progressing according to a fixed and definite plan, and in the exact order of the seasons which he has appointed. In the end of this age, and the dawn of its successor, the Millennial age, Satan is to be bound and his power overthrown, preparatory to the establishment of Christ's kingdom and the beginning of "the world to come, wherein dwelleth righteousness."

Millennium, signifying a thousand years, is by common consent used as the name for the period mentioned in **Rev. 20:4**--the thousand years of Christ's reign, the first age in the "world to come." During the Millennial age, there will be a restitution of all things lost by the fall of Adam (**Acts 3:19-21**), and before its close all tears shall have been wiped away. Beyond its boundary, in the ages of blessedness to follow, there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying; neither shall there be any more pain. The former things will have passed away. (**Rev. 21:4**) God's revelations particularize no further, and there we stop.

We have here only glanced at the mere outline of this plan of the ages. The more we examine it, the more we will find in it perfect harmony, beauty and order. Each age has its part to accomplish, necessary to the complete development of God's plan as a whole. The plan is a progressive one, gradually unfolding from age to age, upward and onward to the grand consummation of the original design of the Divine Architect, "who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will." (**Eph. 1:11**) Not one of these great periods is an hour too long or too short for the accomplishment of its object. God is a wise economist of both time

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and means, though his resources are infinite; and no power, however malicious, for a moment retards or thwarts his purposes. All things, evil as well as good, under divine supervision and overruling, are working together for the accomplishment of his will.

To an uninstructed and undisciplined mind, which can see only a little of the intricate machinery of God's plan, it appears like anarchy, confusion and failure, just as the whole, or even a part, of an intricate machine would appear to a child. To its immature and untutored mind it is incomprehensible, and the opposite motions of its wheels and belts are but confusion. But maturity and investigation will show that the seeming confusion is beautiful harmony, working good results. The machine, however, was as truly a success before the child understood its operation as after. So, while God's plan is, and has been for ages, in successful operation, man has been receiving the necessary discipline, not only to enable him to understand its intricate workings, but also to experience its blessed results.

As we pursue our study of the divine plan, it is essential that we keep in memory these ages and their respective peculiarities and objects; for in *no one* of them can the plan be seen, *but in all of them*, even as a link is not a chain, but several links united form a chain. We obtain correct ideas of the whole plan by noting the distinctive features of each part, and thus we are enabled to divide rightly the Word of truth.

A statement of the Word which belongs to one epoch, or dispensation, should not be applied to another, as things stated of one age are not always true of another. For instance, it would be an untruth to say of the present time that the knowledge of the Lord fills the whole earth, or that there is no need to say to your neighbor, Know the Lord.

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(Isa. 11:9; Jer. 31:34) This is not true in this age, and it cannot be true until the Lord, having come again, has established his kingdom; for throughout this age there have been many seducing deceptions, and we are told that even in the very end of the age--"*In the last days...evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived.*" **(2 Tim. 3:1,13)** It will be as the result of Messiah's reign during the Millennial age that knowledge and righteousness

shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

A similar mistake, and a very common one, is to suppose that God's kingdom is now established and ruling over the earth, and that his will is now done among the nations. This is manifestly far from the truth, for the kingdoms of this world are supported and enriched through oppression, injustice and deceit, to as great an extent as the increasing intelligence of the people will permit. Satan, the present "prince of this world," must yet be displaced, and these kingdoms, now under his control, must become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Anointed, when he shall take unto himself his great power, and reign.

By the light now due to the household of faith, we discern that system and order which mark the stately steppings of our God through the ages past, and we are forcibly reminded of the beautiful lines of Cowper, inspired by a living faith, which trusted where it could not trace the Almighty Jehovah:

He Will Make It Plain

"God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform:
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

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"Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never-failing skill,
He treasures up his bright designs,
And works his sovereign will.

"Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

"Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace.
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

"His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour.
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

"Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his work in vain.
God is his own interpreter,
And he will make it plain."

"I know not the way that's before me,
The joys or the griefs it may bring;
What clouds are o'erhanging the future,
What flowers by the wayside may spring.
But there's One who will journey beside me,
Nor in weal nor in woe will forsake;
And this is my solace and comfort,
'He knoweth the way that I take.'"