

Dispensationalism

What is 'the dispensation of the fullness of times' in Ephesians 1:10? (pt 2)

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Part two of a series. Read [part one](#).

The "fullness of the times" describes *when* Christ will come again.

In our last article, we began answering a reader's question: "What is 'the dispensation of the fullness of the times' in Ephesians 1:10?" Once again, here is the phrase from our reader's question, in context:

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in ***the dispensation of the fullness of the times*** He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth — in Him.
(Ephesians 1:7-10)

As we saw in our last article, this passage confronts us with some terms that require careful study:

- What does Paul under divine inspiration mean when he speaks of a "dispensation"?
- What does he mean by "the fullness of the times"?
- What does it mean to "gather together in one"?
- What does he mean by "all things"?

To answer our reader's question, we've subdivided it into a discussion of the four questions above. We're answering them one by one, and then we'll step back and look at the sum of them.

In our last article, we discussed the definition of a dispensation. We saw that it means a plan, or the carrying out of a plan, depending on the point of view of the subject. We saw that in Ephesians 1:10 Paul is speaking of things from God's perspective as the author of the eternal plan. So when Paul uses the word "dispensation" in the phrase "the dispensation of the fullness of times" he is talking about God's plan for the ages, established and settled "before the foundation of the world" (1:4), centered in Jesus Christ, and now approaching its culmination.

The Fullness of the Times

This brings us to the second question: What does Paul mean by "the fullness of the times"? Paul has told us in the opening verse of Ephesians that God has an eternal plan. Here Paul is telling us *when* God's plan will be brought to completion.

Paul uses very similar words to describe both Jesus' first coming and His second coming. In Galatians 4:4 Paul tells us that "when the fullness of the time had come (a very similar phrase), God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons." And here in Ephesians 1:10 Paul says that God will bring His plan of redemption to its ultimate conclusion "in the fullness of the times". In the original language this means, literally, "at the decisive moment".

In Relation to Christ's First Coming

Galatians 4:4 tell us that there was a perfect time for Christ's birth in Bethlehem to occur. And God was the One who brought it about. God orchestrated all the necessary events. Let's think about a succession of those events spanning several hundred

years, at a very high level: 1.) Over many centuries God brought about a succession of world empires, eventually leading to the Roman Empire. 2.) During the rising and falling of successive empires, God sent Israel and Judah off into captivity in Babylon and Assyria. 3.) Then God brought a remnant of the children of Israel back into the land after their captivity. 4.) God subsequently brought the land of Palestine under the rule of the Roman Empire. 5.) At a particular point in time He caused a particular Roman emperor to decide to take a census throughout the empire. 6.) The terms of that God-ordained census required Mary and Joseph to leave Nazareth and go to Bethlehem at just the time Jesus was to be born, so that He would be born in the city that was prophesied in Scripture.

Now that's a very, very broad overview of what happened. But to make those things happen, God in His providence orchestrated literally trillions of the most minute details over thousands of years. He brought an incredibly complex network of events to the climactic moment when Christ would be born, at the right place and the right time — "the fullness of time," the decisive moment — in complete fulfillment of all that had been prophesied.

In Relation to Christ's Second Coming

In the same way, God continues to move and shape billions of billions of details, persons, and nations, moving events in all their complexity toward the decisive, climactic moment when His Son will come the second time — not in humiliation but in glory, not to give Himself as a sacrifice for sins but to once and for all deliver His people, and the entire creation, from the bondage of sin and corruption.

We do not know precisely when that decisive moment will be, but God has commanded us to be watchful:

But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, "Peace and safety!" then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape.

But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation. For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him. Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing. (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11)

But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth.

Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man. (Luke 21:34-36)

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only. But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the

coming of the Son of Man be. Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left.

Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. (Matthew 24:36-44)

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.

Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. (2 Peter 3:10-13)

A Decisive Moment is Coming

In the fullness of time — at the perfect, decisive moment in God's all-wise and eternal plan — Jesus came the first time. And at the perfect, decisive moment in God's all-wise and eternal plan — "in the dispensation of the fullness of the times" — He will come again. We do not understand all that He is doing. We see this world-system accelerating its headlong plunge toward global ruin. But even in the midst of such circumstances, we can be confident that Christ is seated at the Father's right hand, reigning until "He has put all enemies under His feet" (1 Corinthians 15:25).

Let us never doubt that the omnipotent God of the universe, our Lord and Savior, is in control of all things, orchestrating all events toward the end-goal of that glorious Day. He will not leave any "loose ends."

Our God-given imperative is to occupy ourselves with Christ's business for us in this world — preaching the Gospel to all men, and building up the saints in sound doctrine — while maintaining an attitude of watchful anticipation of Christ's imminent return.

Jesus may come today. And in this passage in Ephesians, Paul tells us even more. Under divine inspiration, he tells us what will happen in God's plan when Christ returns.

Next: What does it mean "to gather together in one"?

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In the original Greek, this passage tells us that God will "re-gather together in one all things in Christ."

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