

The Patriarchal Dispensation was a period from Genesis 4 to Exodus 20, occurring between humanity's expulsion from Eden and the giving of the Mosaic Law. During this time, God primarily interacted with humanity through patriarchs, while people governed themselves through conscience and unwritten principles.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

ADMINISTRATION BY PATRIARCHS:

During the Patriarchal Dispensation, God worked through chosen leaders who represented all of humanity. Key figures like Adam, Noah, and Abraham served as His representatives, through whom He dealt with mankind. This was exemplified in His promise to Abraham: "In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).

These patriarchs weren't just messengers - they actively participated in God's plan, shaping His purposes through their lives and family lines.

This era ended when God narrowed His focus to Israel alone. After this, Gentiles could only approach God by associating with Israel, as Ephesians 2:12 indicates..

KNOWN AS THE "TIMES OF IGNORANCE" (ACTS 17:30)

The Patriarchal Dispensation is aptly described as the "times of ignorance," as referenced in Acts 17:30. During this period, humanity lacked direct, codified divine law, leaving mankind to wander aimlessly in spiritual matters. God's response to this ignorance was to "wink at" or overlook it, as He dealt with humanity collectively, patiently tolerating their spiritual inadequacy. This era's defining characteristic was humanity's ignorance of God's will, paired with God's forbearance in withholding immediate judgment.

SCRIPTURAL BASIS

Acts 17:30 marks a clear transition: the command to repent signaled the start of the Law's Dispensation. Under the Law, repentance required accepting the codified standards of the Mosaic Covenant. The pre-Law era lacked such standards, making God's forbearance essential.

Acts 17:26-28 shows that during this time, humanity was viewed as one entity. God created all nations from one blood, demonstrating His collective dealings with mankind. The text describes humanity's search for God as uncertain and aimless, highlighting the absence of clear divine direction.

Acts 14:16-17 further reveals God's tolerance of humanity's ignorance during this era. While He allowed nations to follow their own ways, He still provided evidence of His existence through general revelation - His providential care and creation served as testimony of His presence and goodness.

ARGUMENTATION

1. **The "Times of Ignorance" and the Patriarchal Dispensation:** Acts 17:30 describes this era as a time when humanity lacked codified law and received divine patience.

2. **The Contrast Introduced by "But Now":** Acts 17:30's command to repent marks the transition to the Law era, introducing moral accountability through clear divine standards.
3. **God's Universal Dealings Pre-Law:** Acts 17:26-28 and 14:16-17 show God dealing with humanity as one entity, allowing nations to seek Him despite their limited understanding.

The evidence confirms that the "times of ignorance" refers to the Patriarchal Dispensation, highlighting its unique role in God's plan..

WORSHIP AND ACCESS TO GOD

During the Patriarchal Dispensation, people worshipped God through faith, obedience, and sacrifice, without written laws to guide them. As shown in Genesis 4:4 and Hebrews 11:4, Abel's offering was accepted because of his faith-based worship.

People learned how to worship through two main channels: teachings passed down by patriarchs and general revelation through creation. Those beyond the reach of patriarchal teaching relied solely on general revelation, which provided limited understanding of God's expectations.

A DISPENSATION OF UNWRITTEN PRINCIPLES

During the Patriarchal Dispensation, God provided unwritten principles of governance that humanity struggled to understand and follow. Without codified laws, people relied on patriarchal teaching and general revelation yet often failed to grasp God's will. As seen in Job 28:12-28, even the wisest struggled to find true understanding, though Job concluded that fearing God was the foundation of wisdom.

This challenge is evident in God's words to Cain (Genesis 4:7) and His mandate to Noah about justice (Genesis 9:6). While these directives established basic moral principles, they lacked specific implementation details. The Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:4) exemplifies humanity's misguided attempts to reach God through their own efforts, leading to judgment and confusion.

The transition to the Law marked a dramatic shift from this period of limited understanding. As Deuteronomy 4:32-35 reflects, God's detailed revelation through Moses provided unprecedented clarity, ending what Acts 17:30 calls the "times of ignorance." The Law's specific instructions, including provisions for witnesses (Deuteronomy 17:6) and cities of refuge (Numbers 35:9-28), replaced the previous era's ambiguity with clear divine guidance.

FAILURE

Despite God's patience, the Patriarchal Dispensation ended in failure as humanity repeatedly rebelled against unwritten divine principles. These failures occurred in distinct stages, revealing mankind's need for clearer divine guidance.