

Chapter XIII

THE MYSTERY OF GOD

We have learned that the seven feasts of the Jews, the seventy weeks of Daniel's vision, and Nebuchadnezzar's dream have provided us with prophetic overviews of events that led to the first advent of our Lord and of events that will lead to His second advent. The Scriptures contain many of these overviews, each of which provides important keys to unlocking *The Mystery of God*, which is God's plan for the ages.

The seven feasts of the Jews were an important part of the sacrificial system which was given with the law on mount Sinai. The law was given to act as a *schoolmaster* (Galatians 3:24-25) to bring the Jews unto Christ through the truth of the gospel that was contained in the shadows and types of the sacrificial system. By and large the Jews did not recognize this aspect of the law. They saw the daily sacrifices as well as the seven feasts of the Jews as ordered rituals and forms, something to be observed daily and yearly according to their covenant relationship with God. Even so there were Jews who, by the Word of God and the Spirit of God, believed God's promise

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of a Savior which was contained in the *mystery* of the sacrificial system. Consequently they trusted the Lord as their Savior.

Even so these believers could not understand that the first three feasts of the Jews portrayed three aspects of our Lord's first advent ministry, and the last three feasts portrayed three aspects of our Lord's second advent ministry, nor could they understand that the middle feast of Pentecost portrayed the church age, which has existed now for nearly two thousand years. This *mystery* was contained in the seven feasts of the Jews, but it was a mystery that could not be understood until other prophecies were first fulfilled.

It is difficult to know exactly how much understanding the Old Testament saints had. We know they understood enough to have their faith in the promised Messiah because our Lord said, *I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me* (John 14:6). Therefore many from Adam to Christ had their faith in our Lord as their Savior. This truth is revealed in a statement made by our Lord to the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection of the dead, *But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living* (Matthew 22:31-32). This truth is also seen in the testimonies of the saints that are recorded in the eleventh chapter of the book of Hebrews. Those who are named there are among the great *cloud of witnesses* (in the twelfth chapter of Hebrews) who lived their lives by faith, and who were used by the writer of the book of Hebrews as examples of how believers in this age are to live by faith. We know David understood a great deal. This can be seen in many of the Psalms and particularly in Psalm fifty-one, where David

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described his relationship with the Lord after his sin with Bathsheba: *O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise. For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise* (Psalm 51:15-17). This reveals the believer's new covenant relationship with the Lord, but this relationship was not yet paid for, and would not be paid for until our Lord Jesus Christ's sacrifice upon the cross of Calvary. Therefore David's understanding was projected far beyond the age in which he lived. This sort of understanding can be seen in other Old Testament saints as well. We get a glimpse of it in the patriarch Enoch. He was translated into heaven (Genesis 5:24) six hundred and seventy-six years before the flood, yet he spoke of the second coming of our Lord according to an account recorded by Jude in the New Testament:

And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, to execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him. (Jude 1:14-15)

These examples convey the truth that some of the Old Testament saints understood much more than they have been given credit for. Some of them apparently understood some things by direct revelation from God -- things that are not necessarily recorded in the Old Testament Scriptures. Nevertheless we also know that there were others, like Daniel, who did not understand some of the things they were given to prophesy:

And I heard, but I understood not: then said I, O my Lord, what shall be the end of these things? And he said, Go thy way, Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end. (Daniel 12:8-9)

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Nebuchadnezzar's dream has provided the historical sequence of the empires related to *the mystery of God* from Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon; Cyrus' and Darius' empire of the Medes and Persians; Alexander's Greece, which was divided among his four generals after his death; and the Roman empire of the Caesars and the popes. These are by no means all of the empires that have existed from the time of the Babylonian empire to the present, but these empires are intrinsically related to God's prophetic purpose in Daniel's people, the Jews, and Daniel's city, Jerusalem.

The vision of the seventy weeks of Daniel, like the seven feasts of the Jews, also had an obvious and a mysterious side to it. The obvious truth was that from the decree to restore and build Jerusalem unto the establishment of the Kingdom of God upon this earth, there was to be a period of seventy times seven from the beginning to the end of the vision, but it was not revealed what the seventy periods of seven were to be. This did not become known until our Lord was crucified (*cut off, but not for himself* [Daniel 9:26]) four hundred and eighty-three years after the decree of Cyrus (454 B.C. to 29 A.D.). Even then it was not known that there would be a gap between the sixty-ninth and the seventieth weeks of Daniel's vision consisting of the entire period of the church age. This parenthesis was hidden in the mystery of the feast of Pentecost, and it could not be solved until four hundred and ninety years had elapsed from the decree of Cyrus without the establishment of the Kingdom. Once those years had passed, it became evident that the last week of Daniel's vision was separated from the others. Consequently when Israel became a nation again in May of 1948, it became evident that the vision of the dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14) was about Israel's resurrection from the nations of the world and not about a literal resurrection of Jews who had died. It also became evident that Israel's resurrection was separated from her

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salvation. It was then possible to know that the feast of trumpets was not connected with the salvation of Israel, but with the first resurrection. Then it became evident that the last three feasts of the Jews are to be associated with the second advent of our Lord, and this revealed that the feast of Pentecost was a prophetic portrayal of the parenthesis between the sixty-ninth and the seventieth weeks of Daniel's vision.

It is apparent then that these overviews required a partial fulfillment of their mysterious aspects before they could be solved; and to those who are without the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, even with a partial fulfillment of these mysteries, they are still without understanding. Our Lord told His disciples, when they asked why He spoke to the scribes and Pharisees in parables, *Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but unto them it is not given* (Matthew 13:11). Thus *the mystery of God* is for the children of God.

At the counsel in Jerusalem, following Paul's first missionary journey into Asia, James said, *Known unto God are all of his works from the beginning of the [ages]* (Acts 15:18), and in the one hundred and thirty-ninth Psalm David wrote:

O LORD, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou compassed my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it. (Psalm 139:1-6)

God's understanding of David portrays God's understanding of all men. If we were to read this Psalm in its entirety, it would reveal that God is Omniscient and Omnipresent. If we would then reflect upon the fact that the Scriptures declare that God created the heavens and the earth by His Word and by His Spirit (Psalm 33:6; 104:30; Genesis 1:1), we would then know that God is

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Omnipotent. In keeping with these attributes, the Scriptures also declare that God does not change (Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8). He is Immutable. These attributes, along with His Holiness, His Righteousness, His Justice, His Mercy and His Grace make God absolutely incomprehensible to the human mind, except as God has revealed Himself to man through His Word and by His Spirit. This is seen in Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, in which he revealed the differences between saved and unsaved men:

And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect: yet not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world, that come to nought: but we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man. For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ. (I Corinthians 2:1-16)

John prophesied of the completion of *the mystery of God* in the tenth chapter of the book of the Revelation:

But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the

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mystery of God should be [brought to completion], as he hath [proclaimed the gospel] to his servants the prophets. (Revelation 10:7)

God's Omniscience is the basis of *the mystery of God*. This can be seen in the fact that the Scriptures declare that our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). The Scriptures also declare that believers were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4). *Such knowledge, as David said, is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it* (Psalm 139:6). This knowledge transcends the fall of Lucifer; the introduction of sin into the world by the serpent; the fall of Adam and Eve; the sin nature and false concepts of all of mankind that derived from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; the revelation of man's sin in the giving of the law; the solution to the sin question in the incarnation, life, vicarious death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead; the proclamation of the truth, as well as the apostasy of the church age; the first resurrection; the revelation of the antichrist; the judgments and events of the great tribulation period; the preaching of the one hundred and forty-four thousand; the salvation of souls during the tribulation; the placing of the abomination of desolation in the temple in Jerusalem; the flight and preservation of one-third of the nation of Israel into the wilderness; the revelation of Jesus Christ on the mount of Olives at His second coming; the battle of Armageddon; the salvation of the nation of Israel; the judgment of the nations; the marriage supper of the Lamb; the binding of Satan for one thousand years; the millennial reign of Christ; the loosing of Satan and the deception of the nations; the judgment of Satan and the great white throne judgment; and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.

This truly is *the mystery of God* (I Corinthians 2:7; Revelation 10:7). It has been portrayed

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in the shadows and types of the sacrificial system; it has been portrayed in prophecies; it has been portrayed in historical incidents that have had an allegorical significance; it has been portrayed in proverbs and parables; and it has been portrayed in direct statements in both the Old and New Testament Scriptures.

Additionally there are the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven (or kingdom of God) contained in the parables of Matthew chapter thirteen and Luke chapter eight. As ministers of the truth, we have been made *stewards of the mysteries of God* (I Corinthians 4:1). Therefore we should not be ignorant of the mystery of the blindness of Israel (Romans 11:25); nor of the mystery of the gospel (Romans 16:25; Ephesians 6:19); nor of the mystery of the resurrection (I Corinthians 15:51); nor of the mystery of His will (Ephesians 1:9); nor of the mystery of Christ (Ephesians 3:3-4; Colossians 4:3); nor of the mystery of the fellowship of Christ (Ephesians 3:9); nor of the mystery of marriage, which typifies the relationship between Christ and His church (Ephesians 5:32); nor of the mystery of the indwelling Spirit of God: *Christ in you, the hope of glory* (Colossians 1:26, 27); nor of the mystery of the iniquity (II Thessalonians 2:7), which was manifested in the fall of Lucifer, and in the introduction of sin into the human family in the garden of Eden, and in the cohabitation of the sons of God with the daughters of men in the days of Noah, and in the betrayal of the Lord by Judas, and will be manifested in the revelation of the antichrist, and in the casting of Satan out of heaven and into the earth at the midpoint of the tribulation period, and in the binding of Satan for one thousand years at the beginning of the millennium, and in the loosing of Satan and the deception of the nations at the end of the millennium; nor should we be ignorant of the mystery of the faith (I Timothy 3:9); nor of the mystery of godliness,

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through the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ (I Timothy 3:16); nor of the mystery of the seven stars which refers to the messengers of the seven churches of Asia (Revelation 1:20) nor, lastly, of the mystery of the woman, the harlot Babylon (Revelation 17:5, 7).

We have considered the overview of the seven feasts of the Jews, the overview of the seventy weeks of Daniel, and the overview of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. There are two more of the many overviews in Scripture that are important to our present study. The first of these is found in the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. The second is found in the twelfth chapter of the book of the Revelation.

These two overviews span essentially the same period of time, but the perspective of each is different. The overview in the Revelation is from the perspective of Israel, who is the *woman* in this chapter. Consequently it spans the time from the birth of Christ to His ascension. It does this in the first five verses of the twelfth chapter of the Revelation. In verse six it jumps in time to the great tribulation period. It is at this point in time (between verses five and six) that the overview in the Gospel of Matthew takes over. This overview is from the perspective of the New Testament church, because it spans the church age with seven parables which were spoken by our Lord. These parables take us in time from the ascension of Christ to the first resurrection at the end of the church age. Once the redeemed have been resurrected, the perspective of Israel takes over once again; because from verse six to the end of the twelfth chapter of the Revelation, this overview spans the period of the tribulation until the salvation of Israel at the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ:

And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of

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Jesus Christ [when they look on Him Whom they pierced]. (Revelation 12:17)

This difference in perspective is very important because the word *elect* is sometimes used to describe the nation of Israel, and at other times it is used to describe both the Jews and the Gentiles who make up the church in this present age. Without the perspective of these two overviews, it would be difficult to know when the elect are Israel and when they are the church. This is the primary reason why many professing Christians believe the church will go through the first three and one-half years of the great tribulation. However if we understand the difference between the perspective of Israel and the perspective of the church, as well as the truth contained in the first three overviews, we will have the correct combination to unlock this aspect of *the mystery of God*.

The seven parables spoken by our Lord in the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew provide the church with essential information for the church age. The parable of the Sower is about the great commission, *Go ye into all of the world, and preach the gospel to every creature* (Mark 16:15). This mission has been passed from generation to generation by faithful churches. Paul told Timothy, *Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also* (II Timothy 2:1-2). He also told him, *I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and*

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they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables (II Timothy 4:1-4).

Paul's warning to Timothy brings us to the second parable spoken by our Lord, the parable of the tares and the wheat. This parable has provided the church with a warning about the work it has been commissioned to do. This work has been done in the world, where the devil has also been at work. Therefore from the first century to the present, the church has been warned not to be ignorant of his devices. Likewise our Lord's warning to the Jews, *Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits* (Matthew 7:15-16), should have been heeded by both the Jews and the church; but it was not heeded when the Jews were the custodians of the truth, and, unfortunately, the church has fallen asleep as well.

This brings us to our Lord's next parable, the parable of the mustard seed. We have already considered this parable in our study of the apostasy of the Laodicean church. Therefore we know that the singular seed that was planted by our Lord was the church which was planted for the healing of the nations. We also know that the unparalleled growth of the mustard plant was the result of the sowing of the tares by the wicked one, and not by the sowing of the wheat by faithful preachers in the church. This can be seen in our Lord's sermon on the mount, where He told the Jews, *Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves* (Matthew 7:13-15). The apostle Paul also taught:

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Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law? For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise.

Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is [Hagar]. For this [Hagar] is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written, *Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband.* (Galatians 4:21-27, emphasis mine)

The *other gospel* of the Judaizers, recorded in Paul's epistle to the Galatians, combined ritual and law as essential elements to salvation. This is *a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death* (Proverbs 14:12). It was born in the lie of the serpent to Eve, and it was typified by our Lord in the tares that were sown among the wheat. In the above quotation we emphasized that *the desolate* (Hagar, who represents law and ritual for salvation) has *many more children* than Sarah (who represents grace and faith). This confirms the fact that the unparalleled growth of the mustard seed was due to the *other gospel* of the *tares among the wheat*, which was also described as the *broad way* in our Lord's sermon on the mount, and not as any kind of a result of preaching the truth of the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

One error leads to another. This brings us to our Lord's fourth parable, the parable of a woman who hid leaven in three measures of meal. The significance of the leaven is found in the sixteenth chapter of Matthew, where our Lord warned His disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and in the eighth chapter of Mark where He warned them to beware of the leaven of Herod. He explained that the leaven of each of these was their doctrine (Matthew 16:12).

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Since it was a woman who took three measures of meal (wheat) and added leaven to them; and since wheat in the first two parables represents children of the kingdom; and since leaven represents false doctrine (teaching); and since women are not to teach or usurp authority over men, but are to be in subjection (I Timothy 2:11-14), the woman in this parable is used in a bad ethical sense because she is teaching three different forms of false doctrine in the church. Her doctrine is the leaven of the Pharisees, the leaven of the Sadducees, and the leaven of Herod. The leaven of the Pharisees is hypocrisy (Luke 12:1), which manifests itself by self-righteousness. The leaven of the Sadducees is the denial of spiritual truth, which has been seen in their denial of the resurrection and other doctrines (Acts 23:8). The leaven of Herod, as we have seen in the chapter on *The Olivet Discourse*, is the world's attempt to provide the conditions of the Kingdom of God by political means. It has manifested itself throughout the history of the church by state-supported churches and attempts to legislate morality. Each of these forms of false doctrine will be a significant part of the apostasy that will precede the first resurrection. Once the first resurrection has taken place, all who will remain upon the earth who profess to be Christians (i.e., the ten toes of Nebuchadnezzar's image or the ten horns of the beast) will be counterfeit Christians. Hence *the whole* [will then be] *leavened* (Matthew 13:33).

The fifth and sixth parables are closely related. The treasure hid in the field is Israel. She was hidden in the field in 70 A.D. because of her rejection of the Lord Jesus Christ as her Savior (Luke 19:14). Nevertheless the Lord sold all that He had (which speaks of His death on the cross of Calvary) to purchase the field (which is the world) in order to obtain the treasure hid in the field. This parable speaks of the salvation of the nation of Israel out of the nations of the world,

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which will occur when she looks on the One Whom she pierced and believes and is saved. Whereas the pearl of great price is the redeemed of all ages (God's called-out assembly [in this age, called the church] which is made up of both Jews and Gentiles). The merchant man is the Lord. He purchased the pearl by His death on the cross of Calvary, His burial and His resurrection from the dead. Since all seven parables are for the age between the ascension of our Lord and the first resurrection, the difference between these two parables is defined by the differences between the two overviews we have been considering in this chapter.

We have already considered the seventh parable, a net let down into the sea, when we considered the techniques of mass evangelism which have produced the apostasy that is characterized by the Laodicean church. It should be noted that these techniques have been used in other ages, other than the Laodicean age. The church gained imperial favor under the Roman emperor Constantine. When he forced the people he conquered to be baptized or die, this was another form of the net let down into the sea. It was also a form of the leaven of Herod, which was introduced into the meal by a woman, and the woman in this case was the Roman Catholic Church. Consequently the ministry of the church has sometimes been according to the truth of the Word of God and at other times it has not, and this is revealed in these seven parables.

It is important for us to understand that the parables of the thirteenth chapter of Matthew show a progression of various influences that have been brought to bear upon the proclamation of the truth in this present age of the church. This progression can be specifically noted in the seven letters of the apostle John to the seven churches in Asia, recorded in the second and third chapters of the book of the Revelation. It is also important for us to remember that all seven

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churches existed in the first century of the present era. Therefore it should be evident that the influences that are characterized by the seven parables did not have the same effect on all of the churches to whom John wrote, nor will all of the churches of this era be affected the same way.

Dr. C. I. Scofield, the primary editor of the Scofield Reference Bible, attempted to make the conditions in the seven churches in Asia a dispensational portrayal of the church age, from the first century to the first resurrection. I must admit that I took his dispensational view to be the proper way to view the seven churches in Asia until I was faced with the writing of this book. It was then that I came to realize that while his theory has some merit, it also has some flaws. For example, in Revelation 2:1-7, the heading for the letter to the church at Ephesus (*The message to Ephesus. The church at the end of the apostolic age; first love left*) would seem to suggest that during the apostolic age the church kept its first love in tack, but at the end of the age the church began to lose its first love. Does this heading present the facts as they are revealed in the Scriptures? No, it does not. All seven of the churches to whom John wrote existed during the apostolic age. So by virtue of this fact, Ephesus does not represent the conditions of the church at the end of the apostolic age. The church at Ephesus presents conditions that existed in a church of the apostolic age; a condition that can exist in any church of any age; a condition that should be avoided in every age. Even so we would have to agree with Dr. Scofield that by the end of the apostolic age there could have been many churches like the church at Ephesus that were fundamentally sound in every respect, but had, nevertheless, become introspective and lost their first love, Jesus Christ. Further, by way of example, the heading over Revelation 2:8-11 in the Scofield Bible (*The message to Smyrna. Period of the great persecution, to A.D. 316*) suggests

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a dispensation of persecution until the date of A.D. 316. Is persecution dispensational? What does the Scripture say? Paul wrote Timothy, *But thou hast fully known my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, charity, patience, persecutions, afflictions, which came unto me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra; what persecutions I endured: but out of them all the Lord delivered me. Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution* (II Timothy 3:10-12). While there have been periods of church history in which there were great persecutions, every believer who is faithful to the truth of the saving grace of Jesus Christ, apart from the deeds of the law, will suffer some kind of persecution for his testimony to the truth.

I find no need to consider all of the headings in the Scofield Bible to belabor a point. I certainly agree with Dr. Scofield that there have been ages that have been characterized by one or more of the seven churches in Asia, but what is more important is to realize that the characteristics of any individual church in any age is not dependent upon the age, but upon the personal choices and directions made by the leadership of the church, and the demands made by the membership of the church upon its leadership. Consequently the seven letters to the seven churches reveal the different responses made by different churches (in every age) to the truths contained in the seven parables of our Lord. These influences will ultimately result in the great apostasy, prior to the first resurrection.