

The Ages

by Lewis Sperry Chafer

The sermon explores the concept of the ages in Scripture, highlighting the importance of understanding the different periods of time and their purposes.

Scripture: Acts 3:21

Topics: "Bible Translation", "Gods Kingdom"

Description

Lewis Sperry Chafer discusses the hindrances caused by errors and inconsistencies in Bible translations, particularly in the use of the English word 'world,' which has multiple meanings in the original text. He emphasizes the importance of understanding the different ages mentioned in Scripture, such as the age of law and the present age of grace, each with distinct conditions and purposes. Chafer delves into the revelation of a new age for the Gentiles, centered on Christ's sacrificial death and the formation of the Church as His heavenly bride, separate from the earthly kingdom promised to the Jews. He clarifies the Divine order of events leading to the establishment of Christ's kingdom and the ultimate victory over all enemies.

Transcript

It is a conspicuous fact that the comparatively few errors and inconsistencies in translation, found in the English Authorized Version of the New Testament, serve to hinder, directly or indirectly, any clear understanding of the teachings of Scripture in regard to the conditions and relationships of the world at the present time. Even the revision did not greatly relieve this confusion beyond the addition of some helpful marginal renderings. It would seem, if it were possible, that Satan, the author of confusion and the only one advantaged by it, had been able in some subtle way to keep in darkness that which would otherwise be light; thus preventing a revelation of his own projects.

The continuation of these misleading translations is most evident in the unqualified use of the English word "world." The word which, in common usage, has a limited meaning is used, by the translators, as the one English rendering for at least four widely differing ideas in the original. So that, if the truth contained in this important body of Scripture is to be understood, the student must not only know the various meanings which are expressed by the one word, but also be able to determine the correct use of the word in any single instance. This necessary effort to understand the real meaning of many passages has, therefore, placed the simple truth they contain beyond the average reader of the Bible.

The English word "world" as used in the New Testament may mean a distinct period of time, commonly known as an age (as its original is a few times translated); or it may refer to the things created: the earth, its inhabitants, or their institutions. Two of these original meanings are used in connection with this present time. First, as to an age, or period of time:

The ages are often referred to in Scripture, and the study of the exact conditions and purposes of each of them is not fanciful: but is rather the only adequate foundation for any true knowledge of the Bible. Not all the ages can be taken up in this Chapter, but only such as may be confused with the present one.

The age of law, which began with the giving of the law at Mount Sinai and ended, approximately, with the death of Christ, is mentioned by Zacharias in his prophecy at the birth of John: "As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets which have been since the age began" (Lu. 1:70). The same period is referred to by Peter in Acts 3:21: "Whom the heavens must receive until the restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his prophets since the age began." These references, it will be seen, are not to the creation of the world, as the English rendering would indicate; but to the beginning of that particular period in which the prophets spake.

The present age of grace, in which the grace of God has had its appearing unto salvation, began where the age of law ended, or with the death of Christ; and will continue until He comes again. The duration of this age is suggested by the communion table, which, being peculiar to this age, will continue to its end. Of this sacrament it is said: "As oft as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till he come" (I Cor. 11:26).

As a distinct period of time this age is mentioned by the word "world" no less than forty times in the New Testament. A few of these passages follow: "And whosoever speaketh a word against the son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world (age), neither in the world (age) to come" (Matt. 12:32). "And as he sat upon the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world (age)?" (Matt. 24:3). "The field is the world (men); the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; the enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world (age); and the reapers are the angels" (Matt. 13:38, 39). "And, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world (age)" (Matt. 28:20). "For the children of this world (age) are in their generation wiser than the children of light" (Lu. 16:8). "And set him at his own right hand in the heavenlies, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world (age), but that which is to come" (Eph. 1:20, 21). "We should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world (age)" (Titus 2:12). By these and many other passages, it may be seen that the present age is a particular limited period of time in which special conditions are to prevail, and definite purposes are to be realized.

Judging from the mass of Christian writings and from utterances in public address and prayer, this age is assumed by many, without question, to be the Kingdom of Christ; though no Scripture is found to warrant that conclusion.

There is a kingdom of God which embraces the entire universe, over which God is enthroned, and to this kingdom every enemy must finally be brought back to original subjection and adjustment, or be banished forever. This final victory is described in I Cor. 15:24, 25: "Then cometh the end, when He (Christ) shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when He shall have put down all rule and all

authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under His feet."

There is a still more extensive body of Scripture which anticipates a literal kingdom of righteousness and peace upon the earth; this theme being the burden of the Old Testament prophets, and was announced by John Baptist, by Christ and His disciples. This announcement was simple and plain: "The kingdom is at hand." The expression "at hand" here used is significant; indicating not necessarily the immediate future, though the kingdom was definitely offered to that generation; but that the earthly kingdom was the next event which had been clearly announced by the prophets. When the Messiah had been positively rejected by the Jews, He began, alone, without even the sympathy of His disciples, to unfold this forthcoming mystery-age, which had been kept secret in the councils of God, and which was more perfectly revealed to Paul, the first messenger to the Gentiles. Of this revelation of a hitherto unknown age, Paul writes in Eph. 3:1-11: "For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles, if ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given to me to you-ward: how that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words, whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ) which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ by the gospel: whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of His power. Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; and to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ: to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The same truth is emphasized in Rom. 16:25: "Now to him that is of power to stablish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began."

This new age of the Gentiles was also to have its hope centered in Jesus Christ, but in His sacrificial death rather than His kingly reign. It was to be an age in which the Gentiles were to be visited and a people called out from them for His own Person (Acts 15:14); and these people, who are the real Church, were to be built together upon a rock (Matt. 16:18); their glorious salvation and final heavenly perfection were to rest only on His perfect and finished work for them. By this Divine transformation, He would secure, out of all nations, both Gentiles and Jews, a heavenly people; wholly fitted in quality to be His own body, His heavenly bride, and a kingdom of priests unto God.

All this, though not revealed in past ages, was known in the councils of God (Acts 15:18) and is parenthetical in the history of the Jew. It is a delay of their earthly kingdom and in no way its fulfillment or substitute.

Want of knowledge of the right divisions of truth is also evident in the general impression that God has cast off His people, the Jews, and that the Gentiles are their rightful successors and the recipients of the blessings of their unfulfilled prophecies. This confusion is due to a failure to distinguish between this and the following age.

Two distinct lines of seed were promised to Abraham. One, an earthly seed, to be like the dust of the earth, without number (Gen. 13:16), centered wholly in the earth by a relationship of physical generation:

the other seed were likened to the stars of heaven, without number (Gen. 15:5), centered wholly in the heavenlies by a relationship of Spirit regeneration, which is the present answer of God to all true Abrahamic faith (Rom. 4:1-5). The earthly people found their origin in the physical fatherhood of Abraham: while the heavenly people find theirs in the shed blood of Christ. One had an earthly history from Abraham to their dispersion among the Gentiles--a history which will yet be resumed and the everlasting covenants fulfilled in the faithfulness of God: the other has a transient earthly pilgrimage from the Cross to their completion; when they will be caught up to meet and marry their Bridegroom, and be forever with the Lord (I Thes. 4:13-17).

To one, Christ is the coming glorious Messiah, who will actually sit upon the throne of His father, David (Lu. 1:31-33), in a literal earthly kingdom (else all Scripture language fails): to the other, He is the glorious Head of the Body, and coming Bridegroom. One of these lines of seed are the favored subjects in the earthly kingdom: while the other is to be in His bosom as a bride, and be associated with Him in His reign (I Cor. 6:2; Rev. 3:21).

As these two lines of seed are everywhere distinct, there must be at least two separate ages for the accomplishment of these ends. What, then, are these ages?

If it is believed that an earthly kingdom, with Messiah as King, is promised the Jew, it must also be admitted that the Jew is not now enjoying that kingdom; nor has he had any semblance of a kingdom in all the centuries since his dispersion among the Gentiles. This age cannot, therefore, be the predicted earthly kingdom of Christ. Turning to Acts 15:13-18, a description of the present age and that which will follow is found. The passage is here given: "And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me: Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, after this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up; that the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things. Known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world."

It is recorded that, after His resurrection, Jesus was seen for forty days by His apostles whom He had chosen; and during this time He was speaking to them concerning the Kingdom. It was natural, therefore, for them to inquire, at the end of those days, "Lord, wilt Thou at this time restore again the kingdom unto Israel?" (Acts 1:6) and they had full warrant from the prophets to expect that great event when their Messiah came. They had not, however, grasped the meaning of the then dawning age of the gathering out of the Bride, and in this passage they are seen adjusting themselves to the newly revealed Divine program, and recognizing the God-appointed delay in the predicted earthly kingdom.

In Acts 15: just referred to, the purpose and order of two distinct ages is set forth. The first age is described as the "visiting of the Gentiles," that from among them a heavenly people may be called out, and is a description of this present age, which had its beginning in the very generation in which this passage was written; for no previous age could meet these conditions. The second age, here described, is that of a distinct rebuilding of the Davidic order, which is clearly separated from the former age by the return of Christ. This same order of events is also carefully maintained wherever these events are referred to in Scripture, and any confusion of the order is a positive violence to the truth. The revealed consummation of this Gentile age is always the return of Christ, who comes first to receive His own; and then to render judgment upon all the nations and to bind the enemy and place him in the pit. The same

return of Christ is the necessary preliminary event before any kingdom of righteousness and peace can be realized upon the earth. No amount of enlightened sentiment can establish a kingdom without a king; and no universal blessedness can be experienced in this world until the enemy is dethroned and banished. Sadly has the world failed to include these two necessary Divine movements, in its vain dream and godless attempt at a perfected universe!

The purpose of this age is then clearly defined as the visiting of the Gentiles to call out of them a people for His name; the called out people being the true Church (as that word signifies), which is made up of all the saved ones who have been saved since the Day of Pentecost, at which time the Spirit came to unite them into one body and to indwell them. They are the heavenly people, regenerate and complete in Christ, their Bridegroom and living Head.

When this age is considered as the Kingdom of Christ it is usually thought of as in a state of development. This is a necessary conclusion in view of the presence of sin and failure in the world. But the setting up of the earthly kingdom is never described as the result of a process. Scripture deals conclusively with this question.

In Dan. 2:34-35, an image is described, which is defined as being a symbol of the then dawning Gentile world power (which is still continuing, Lu. 21:24). The image is here made to represent both the development of world rule and its terrible and final ending. The image is seen to be gradually developing from one world government to another until the form of the image is wholly completed. Its ending is then precipitated by a shattering blow from a Stone, "cut out without hands." By the same inspired interpretation, the "Stone" becomes both a symbol of superhuman power, being "cut out without hands;" and a type of Christ, the Ancient of Days, in His coming to the earth as a resistless Monarch; banishing all rule and authority. A portion of the whole passage reads thus: "Thou sawest till that a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon his feet that were of iron and clay, and brake them to pieces. Then was the iron, the clay, the brass, the silver, and the gold, broken to pieces together, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing-floor; and the wind carried them away, that no place was found for them: and the stone that smote the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth" (Dan. 2:34-35).

This being a Divinely interpreted prophecy as to the extent and ending of the present Gentile age, it should be noted that the Stone (Christ) strikes the image (the world power) with one destructive blow, and at the time when it has become fully developed. The blow is struck on the part of the image which is last formed. The great image is thus instantly and violently broken to pieces and is even blown away "like the chaff of the summer threshing-floor." In like manner, according to this prophecy, the whole Gentile rule will suddenly be broken and will vanish.

It should also be noted from these symbols that the Stone does not "become a mountain and fill the whole earth" until the great image has been scattered to dust. From this it is certain that there can be no development of the Kingdom of Christ on the earth before the final breaking of the kingdoms of the earth. This same order is recognized throughout all prophecy. The king suddenly returns as lightning shining from one part of heaven to the other; Satan is violently seized and cast into prison; and a nation is born at once. The second Psalm connects the kingly reign of Christ--the time when He is set upon the holy hill of Zion--with the time when He shall claim the nations of the earth and "break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces as a potter's vessel." Also in Matt. 25:31, "when He sits on the throne of His glory" the "blessed of the Father" are called to enter the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world.

And in Rev. 12:7-12, where Satan is cast out into the earth and the execution of his sentence is begun, the announcement is made by a great voice in heaven, "Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ." There is no evidence of a gradual process here; all is sudden and decisive.

Again, this age is not the coming earthly kingdom for nowhere are the promised conditions of that kingdom now to be found. The Old Testament prophecies contain long and detailed descriptions of that glorious time; God's ancient people shall become the chosen nation, restored to their own land; the enemy shall be banished; the earth shall be purified, and blossom as a rose. "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.

And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:6-9). "And in that day will I make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, and with the fowls of heaven, and with the creeping things of the ground: and I will break the bow and the sword and the battle out of the earth, and will make them to lie down safely" (Hos. 2:18).

"And it shall come to pass in that day, that the mountains shall drop down new wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the rivers of Judah shall flow with waters, and a fountain shall come forth of the house of the Lord, and shall water the valley of Shittim" (Joel 3:18). "Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion: for, lo, I come, and I will dwell in the midst of thee, saith the Lord. And many nations shall be joined to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people: and I will dwell in the midst of thee, and thou shalt know that the Lord of hosts hath sent me unto thee" (Zech. 2:10, 11).

"Thus saith the Lord of hosts; in those days it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you" (Zech. 8:23). "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind. But be ye glad and rejoice forever in that which I create: for, behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy.

And I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people: and the voice of weeping shall be no more heard in her, nor the voice of crying. There shall be no more thence an infant of days, nor an old man that hath not filled his days: for the child shall die an hundred years old; but the sinner being an hundred years old shall be accursed. And they shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them" (Isa. 65:17-21). "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.

Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert" (Isa. 35:5, 6). "But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel. After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sins no more" (Jer. 31: 33, 34).

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon the kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this" (Isa. 9:6, 7).

"He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His Father David: and He shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of His kingdom there shall be no end" (Lu. 1:32, 33). "And He shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth" (Isa. 11:12). "And He shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid: for the mouth of the Lord of hosts hath spoken it" (Micah 4:3,4).

Though blessings abound in the individual heart where Christ is enthroned, yet not one trace of this glorious transformed earth can be found in the present Gentile age.

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