

# CHAPTER SIX

## THE COURSE OF THE PRESENT AGE THE CHURCH AGE (GRACE)

### INTRODUCTION

Any person who refers to the Scriptures as the Old and New Testament bears witness to the fact that God has divided His program into time segments. The history of revelation gives evidence to the progress of divine revelation through successive ages. Chafer states:

The dispensational study of the Bible consists in the identification of certain well-defined time periods which are divinely indicated, together with the revealed purpose of God relative to each. . . .

The unrestrained, sovereign purpose of God is seen in the ordering of the succession of the ages. That God has a program of the ages is disclosed in many passages (cf. Deut. 30:1-10; Dan. 2:31-45; 7:1-28; 9:24-27; Hos.3:4 - 5:15 Matt. 23:37--24:31; Acts 15:13-18; Rom. 11:13-29; 2 Thess. 3:1-12; Rev. 2:1--22:31). Likewise, there are well-defined periods of time related to the divine purpose. The Apostle Paul writes of the period between Adam and Moses. (Rom. 5:14; John speaks of the law as given by Moses, but grace and truth as coming by Christ (John 1:17). Christ also speaks of the "times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24), which are evidently to be distinguished from Jewish "times and seasons" (Acts 1:7; 1 Thess. 5:1). Likewise, He spoke of a hitherto unannounced period between His two advents and indicated its distinctive features (Matt. 13:1-51), and predicted a yet future time of "great tribulation" and defined its character (Matt. 24:9-31). There are "last days" for Israel (Isa. 2:1-5) as well as last days" for the Church (2 Tim. 3:1-5). The Apostle John anticipates a period of one thousand years and relates this to the reign of Christ, at which time the Church, His bride, will reign with Him (Rev. 20:1-6). That Christ will sit on the throne of David and reign over the house of Jacob forever is declared by the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:31-33), and that there will be an ever abiding new heaven and new earth is as clearly revealed (Isa. 65:17; 66:22; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). In Hebrews 1:1-2 sharp contrast is drawn between "time past" when God spoke to the fathers by the prophets and "these last days" when He is speaking unto us by His son: Similarly, it is clearly disclosed that there are *ages past* (Eph. 3:5; Col. 1:26), the *present age* (Rom.12:2; Gal. 1:4) and the *age, or ages, to come* (Eph. 2:7; Heb 6:5; note Eph. 1:10), where the future age is termed *the dispensation* .... of the fullness ... of times ... Christ is the center of this eternal plan of God for the ages. He is both the central figure and the prominent and dominant figure in the ages.

#### **1. He is the one on whose account the ages were ordered.**

(Heb 1:2 NNAS)

in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.

## 2. He is "King of the ages."

(1 Tim 1:17 NNAS)

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, *be* honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

## 3. The ages center in His cross.

(Heb 9:26 NNAS)

Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.

(1 Cor 10:11 NNAS)

Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

## 4. His cross was planned before the ages began.

(1 Cor 2:7 NNAS)

but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden *wisdom* which God predestined before the ages to our glory;

(2 Tim 1:9 NNAS)

who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity,

(Titus 1:2 NNAS)

in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago,

## 5. In past ages that which we now know was not revealed.

(Rom 16:25 NNAS)

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past,

We should take a moment to look at this word which plays such an important place in our discussions. Age or ages from the Greek *αιων* (*aion*). This word is a time word often translated *world*, *age*, or *ages*. Abbott-Smith defines it thus:

1. . . *a space of time*, as , *a life*, a generation, period of history, an indefinitely long period; in NT of an indefinitely long period, *an age*, *eternity*. 2 . . . the sum of the periods of time, including all that is manifested in them. . .

Other words which might be confused with *aion* are: *kosmos* (world) refers to the ordered universe, the scheme of material things, *oikoumene* (world) refers to the inhabited earth, this word *aion* (world) views the world under the aspect of time. This is not meant to be an exhaustive study of this word but simply to give you a general understanding.

*Aion* is frequently used in the sense of eternity, the sum of all the ages. It is also used frequently in regard to the separate ages of God's dealing with men. When so used it may refer to a past age, the present age, or a coming age. There is reference to a present age for Israel in Matthew 12:32, and also a future age for Israel in Mat-

thew 12:32. In regard to the program for the church there is also a reference to this present age in 1 Corinthians 1:20, and a future age in Ephesians 1:21. In the use of these terms *present age* and *future age*, it should be borne in mind that their connotation may not always be the same. The present age for the church, spoken of by Paul, is not the same as the present age for Israel, spoken of by Christ. Nor is the expectation in the future age for the church the same as that for Israel. It is important that the reader determine, from the context, to whom the writer is speaking. Great confusion has and will result from a failure to make this distinction.

## **THIS PRESENT AGE**

As it is used in the New Testament, according to the normal usage of the words, *this present age* refers to that period of time in which the speaker or writer then lived. As used in reference to Israel in the Gospels *this present age* referred to the period of time in which Israel was anticipating the coming of the Messiah to fulfill all covenant promises. The coming age was the age to be inaugurated by the Messiah at His advent. In reference to the church, the term “this present age” refers to that period from the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost to the coming of Christ for His Church. The phrase “the coming age” could be used in its earthly aspect, to which the church will be related (Eph. 1:21), or in its eternal aspect (Eph. 2:7).

(Eph 1:21 NNAS)

far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

(Eph 2:7 NNAS)

so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

There are a number of ways to distinguish this present age from preceding ages:

1. In all previous ages Christ was anticipated, but in this present age He has come, died, been resurrected and is looked to now in His position at the right hand of the Father:
2. The Holy Spirit, who in previous ages came upon certain men to empower them to a given task, has taken up His residence in every believer.
3. In previous ages the good news announced was anticipatory, but in the present age the declaration of the good news announces an accomplished salvation through Christ.
4. The revelation in previous ages was incomplete, but in this present age, since Christ came to reveal the Father, revelation is completed.
5. Since this present age is marked by antagonism to God and His anointed, it bears a distinct characteristic as an evil age.
6. This age is under the domination of Satan, its god, in a unique and unprecedented way.
7. The nation of Israel has been set aside as the particular object of God's dealing and cannot expect the fulfillment of her promises during this age.

## THE DIVINE PURPOSE IN THE PRESENT AGE

The Old Testament ages, in which the purpose of God for Israel is stated in the unconditional covenants into which God entered and by which He is bound, closes with those purposes unrealized. After the death of Christ, God instituted a new divine program, not to replace the program for Israel, but to interrupt that divinely covenanted program. This new program is anticipated by the Lord in His upper room discourse in John 13 to 15 and becomes actual after the advent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The Jerusalem council announced (Acts 15:14 NNAS) "Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name."

The "taking from among the Gentiles" thus constitutes God's purpose for this present age. This people constitute the Church: The body of which He is the head (Eph. 1:22-32): The bride of which He is the bridegroom (Eph. 5:25-27,32): The branch of which He is the supporting vine (John 15:1): The flock of which He is the Shepherd (John 10:7-27): The temple of which He is the cornerstone (Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:5): The ministering priests of which He is the high priest (1 Peter 2:5-9): The new creation of which He is the head and the first fruits (1 Cor. 15:45). The reason for this calling out is stated in Eph 2:7 (NNAS) so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

There was that in God which no created being had ever seen. They had seen His glory, His majesty, His wisdom, and His power; but no angel or man had ever seen His grace. Other attributes might be subject to a variety of demonstrations; but the manifestation of grace is restricted to what God may do for those among men who, in spite of the fact that they deserve His judgments, are objects of His grace. As every other attribute or capacity of God must have its perfect exercise and exhibition--even for His own satisfaction--in like manner His grace must also have its infinitely perfect revealing within the restricted undertaking by which He saves the lost. To say that a sinner is saved by grace is to declare that, on the grounds of a substitute's death and in response to faith in that Saviour, God has wrought a work so perfect in its entirety and so free from the co-operation of other beings that it is a complete all - satisfying - to - God demonstration of His grace. A statement of this kind may be made as easily as words from a sentence; but who on earth or in heaven is able to comprehend the infinity of such a salvation? This demonstration, it should be added, will by the very nature of the case, have its outshining in the life of each individual thus saved. It may be assumed that, had but one of all the human family been selected for the supreme honor of exhibiting eternally before all created beings the infinity of sovereign grace, the salvation of that one would be no different than the salvation of any one of the unnumbered throng from every kindred, tribe and people who are saved by grace. (William Speary Chafer)

It would seem, then, that God, in this present age, is pursuing a program through which His infinite grace shall be perfectly displayed throughout all eternity.

## THE CHARACTER OF THIS PRESENT AGE

This present age, dating from the rejection of the Messiah by Israel unto the taking up of the Church at the rapture, is viewed in Scripture as a mystery. Paul makes this clear, when he writes:

(Col 1:24-27 NNAS)

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions. {25} *Of this church* I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the *preaching of the word of God, {26} that is, the mystery which has been hidden*

from the *past* ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, {27} to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

In this passage Paul makes it very clear that the divine program, the gathering of the church, is the mystery. The mystery is something which was not formerly revealed, and therefore unknown, but now is made by God. With this teaching other Scripture agrees (Rom. 16:25-26; 1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 3:5-9).

Scripture uses the word, mystery, for that divine purpose or program of God, known to Him from eternity, but which could not and would not have been known unless it was revealed by God; unknown in other ages, but now known by revelation. Mysteries are sacred secrets, hitherto unknown, but now known by revelation. In the 27 New testament usages of the word "mystery" it will be observed that the body of truth referred to as a mystery is a particular truth related to this present age. Those mysteries comprise the added revelation given concerning this present age, which supplements the Old Testament revelation.

(Eph 3:5 NNAS)

which in other generations was not made known  
to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed  
to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit;

Chafer, commenting on this Scripture writes:

No better definition of a New Testament mystery will be found than set forth in this context. A New Testament mystery is a truth hitherto withheld, or "Hid in God" (vs. 9), but now revealed. The sum total of all the mysteries in the New Testament represents that entire body of added truth found in the New Testament which is unrevealed in the Old Testament. On the other hand, the New Testament mystery is to be distinguished from the mystery of the cults of Babylon and Rome, whose secrets were sealed and held on penalty of death; for the New Testament mystery, when it is revealed, is to be declared to the ends of the earth, and is restricted only to the extent of the limitation of the natural man (1 Cor. 2:14).

(Eph 3:9 NNAS)

and to bring to light what is the administration  
of the mystery which for ages has been hidden  
in God who created all things;

(1 Cor 2:14 NNAS)

But a natural man does not accept the things of the  
Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and  
he cannot understand them, because they are  
spiritually appraised.

These are the mysteries of the New Testament:

1. The existence of this present age (Matt. 13:11)
2. The blinding of Israel so that Gentiles might be brought to God (Rom. 11:25)
3. The formulation of the Church (Eph. 3:3-9)
4. Salvation by grace (1 Cor. 2:7)

5. The incarnation (1 Tim. 3:16)
6. The relation of Christ to men (Col. 2:2; 4:3)
7. A new method by which man is received into the presence of God (1 Cor. 15:51)

This is not an exhaustive list but these are the mysteries that we will be considering in our discussion at this time.

The existence of an entirely new age, which only interrupts, temporarily, God's program for Israel, is one of our strongest arguments for the premillennial position. It is necessary for one who rejects that interpretation to prove that the church itself is the consummation of God's program. (consummation not culmination)

As we read the Scriptures we can see many instances where the Old Testament prophet passed over, or did not see, this present dispensation. I will give a few examples and in each I will place this mark [X] to indicate the parenthesis where this age should be.

(Psa 118:22 NNAS) The stone which the builders rejected [X] Has become the chief corner *stone*.

(Isa 9:6 NNAS) For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; [X] And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

(Isa 53:10-11 NNAS) But the LORD was pleased To crush Him, putting *Him* to grief; If He would render Himself *as* a guilt offering, [X] He will see *His* offspring, He will prolong *His* days, And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand. {11} As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see *it and* be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities.

(Zec 9:9-10 NNAS) Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout *in triumph*, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, Humble, and mounted on a donkey, Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey. [X] {10} I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim And the horse from Jerusalem; And the bow of war will be cut off. And He will speak peace to the nations; And His dominion will be from sea to sea, And from the River to the ends of the earth.

(Luke 1:31-32 NNAS) "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. [X] {32} "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David;

As you can see allowance was made for the existence of this age without it being specifically designated in the Scriptures. G. H. Pember, in *The Great Prophecies*, writes, ". . .the times of the Church are not properly a part of the fifth dispensation, but a parenthesis fixed in it on account of the perversity of the Jews; an inserted period, unknown to Old Testament prophecy, and set apart for the preparation of a heavenly, and not an earthly people." (p. 231)