

# The Ages of Man

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### 1. From the Creation to the Flood

Although the assertion is constantly made that the early chapters of Genesis are to be regarded as purely mythical, legendary or allegorical, it must be evident to a candid reader that the sober, dignified, restrained yet magnificent language of these early chapters removes them from any such classification. There is no Atlas bearing the world upon his shoulders; no elephant being borne upon the back of a tortoise, swimming upon some limitless ocean; but there is a concise statement of beginnings and of early history upon this remarkable planet, which bears the characteristics of soberness and truth. The entire absence of speculative thought is impressive. However distasteful to the man with his head inflated by the importance of his own ideas, there is a dogmatism and finality about truth which is superb and the man governed in thought by the truth is not enslaved or restricted; but is free indeed.

The sublime opening "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" is "without date, without definition of God and without description of process." It negatives atheism, pantheism, unitarianism and every heresy ever propounded as to origin. We have here an all-inclusive beginning, and what follows does not involve the creation of inanimate things but merely concerns their adjustments in order that this planet might become a suitable habitat for living creatures and in particular for man.

These necessary adjustments for the staging of life are presented in the following order in Genesis chapter 1. (a) Light is commanded to shine out of darkness, (b) A suitable firmament or atmosphere is brought into existence, (c) The waters under the firmament, the seas, are gathered together as one, (d) The heavenly bodies are set in relationship to the earth, the sun being made or appointed to rule the day and the moon to rule the night. The remarkable qualities of light, air and water, although in a measure familiar, have been too readily taken for granted. The more we know of them, the more emphatically shall we endorse the divine sentiment that they are good: good because perfectly adapted to the purpose for which they were brought into being? No! The argument from design is not dead: the mysterious modern universe only emphasises with intensity that there is a Designer. Light is the prime essential of all life: without it, life would be impossible, and men are just discovering how good light really is. Baffled concerning its ultimate nature, they have become more intelligent as to its functions and realise, among other things, as never before, that the chemical mechanism of plants depends, not merely upon warmth, but upon light as such. The marvellous adaptation of the air to creature needs, ministering to the opposed demands of the vegetable and animal kingdoms; the perfect correlation of the height

of the atmosphere to our physical constitution so that we breathe with ease and are normally entirely unconscious of any atmospheric pressure; its adjustment to the weight of water vapour which it bears on high, so balancing the clouds, are evidences of the work and foresight of an all-wise Creator. Thus early too—before the experimental verification—we have the assertion of the unification of the seas. Let us observe, moreover, the orderly progress in this work—things inanimate, the mineral kingdom, coming first into view; followed by sentient life in the vegetable kingdom, then conscious life in the animal kingdom, and lastly by spiritual life in the human realm. With the creation of man, the highest of God's works, God rested.

The first chapter gives us, as it were, the architectural design of a stupendous edifice, plain unadorned but magnificent in its proportions. In chapter 2 the writer and artist selects one apartment of this structure as the background for the portrait of the inmate—MAN, and this difference of scale and intention in chapters 1 and 2 explains the difference in style in these chapters. Man is the central theme of the second chapter and of the two chapters immediately succeeding, and the story told therein throbs with human interest. Details are now brought into view which would have been out of place in the bird's-eye view of the first chapter. When, however, we are told that God made man out of the dust of the ground we need not indulge in childish thoughts about the process. The elements of his physical constitution God took from the ground and God breathed into man, divinely fashioned, the breath of life and man became a living soul. In this breathing into man by God "the breath of the spirit of Life" there lies the great distinction between human and animal life. Man thus made and created was set in a "Paradise of Delight" yet was he not placed in it to enjoy idleness. Along with the positive duty to till and keep or guard the garden there was a negative injunction given to man. Of one tree he must not eat except on pain of death. Our highest moral character, it would seem, can only be realised under discipline involving a test. God has designed that our liberty should be conditioned by our loyalty to His law and we shall do well to reflect that in the mercy of God, temptation was reduced to the narrowest possible limits, one and only one prohibition being imposed; the one thing forbidden to Adam being that which was fraught with incalculable harm. In the garden, conditioned by obedience to God's will, man was given a suitable help. The original status of woman is of interest in the light of present-day movements and tendencies. Although not an absolute equal, she was given neither as a slave nor as a rival; but in the full dignity of humanity, she was set to be his companion and partner in life.

Now, just as chapters 1 and 2 answer for us questions arising in the presence of the created order, so chapter 3 replies to questions arising from the moral order or disorder in the world and explains, what is otherwise inexplicable, the universality of sin, sorrow, suffering and death. The story of the speaking serpent of course, implies an intelligent agency at work impelled by malicious animosity against man. There is no thought in Scripture of the temptation being of the serpent's own devising; but there is

everywhere implied the subtle design of the devil. The subsequent degradation of the instrument in the temptation is a suitable illustration of the degrading influence of sin. The effect of the transgression is not to be attributed to inherent qualities in the fruit of the tree; but the moral effect is to be explained by the moral cause—disobedience to the divine command. It is a fascinating study and one fraught with profit to observe how the devil seduced our first parents. First of all there is a question raised as to whether God had spoken or not, a doubt swiftly followed by the denial of God's truth, as the evil one asserted "Surely ye shall not die." This denial was speedily followed by the poisonous suggestion that God is not so good as in those days of innocence Mother Eve imagined, but that He withholds that which is for man's highest good. To obey God wholeheartedly and fully he insinuates is to be cramped in style, narrowed in thought, confined in pleasure, and robbed of joy. How confining and restricting only to know the good! Get to know all sides of the question, the good and the evil, such is the road to expansive thought, to freedom, to be as gods—and dismiss the thought that God is a God of judgment for "Surely ye shall not die!" Is not the appeal uncommonly like much that passes for modern thought and alas! the tragic result is manifested on every hand for sorrow, misery, suffering, death, are the wretched entail of Satan's seductive triumph. If in the devil's lie there is half a truth, inasmuch as our first parents did not suffer the penalty of physical death immediately, it is equally true that they experienced at once that separation from God, which is spiritual death.

Through the dark shadow of God's inquisition and sentence, there shines that blessed hope which illumines the sky of promise; the hope of a deliverer. "I will put enmity between thee and the woman and between thy seed and her seed: it shall bruise thy head and thou shalt bruise His heel." Surely here we have an intimation of the Incarnation: of the age-long conflict between good and evil and of the ultimate triumph of good: yea of Christ. It is a magnificent pictorial metaphor announcing the triumph of the woman's Seed by way of suffering.

So little did the woman appreciate the enormity of her sin, yet so firmly had she apprehended the import of the prophecy that she called her firstborn Cain or Acquisition, saying, "I have gotten a man from the Lord." And yet it seems probable that early in life Cain displayed those qualities of waywardness, independence and rebellion that break the heart of true parenthood, for Abel's name signifies Vanity. May it not be that God permits the heart of mother and father to be grieved and crushed that we may learn in measure what sin is to Him?

The story of Cain and Abel is abidingly instructive. Both approached God in an attitude of professed reverence and worship; but Cain came in the way that is natural to man: Abel came in the way that has ever been acceptable to God. Cain brought an offering which doubtless had cost him a great deal in the way of effort. He cultivated that which had come under the curse of God and presented the fruit of his labour for the

acceptance of God. Abel by his sacrifice acknowledged that his life was forfeited; but he availed himself of a suitable substitute acceptable to God and through the centuries he has witnessed by his sacrifice that approach to God is on the ground of blood. This way of access was pointed out to Cain by a gracious God, who is no respecter of persons when He said "If thou doest (offerest) well, shalt thou not be accepted? and, if thou doest not well, sin (a sin offering), lieth (or coucheth) at the door."

And so, dear disappointed sinner, God's appointed way is still, in the grace of God, open for thee.

Two things more, although details, require explanation for the removal of difficulties. When we read "Thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth" it simply means that Cain was now cursed from the earth which would no longer yield to him the fullness of its increase. When we read that Cain went out from the presence of the Lord we are to understand not that he henceforth evaded divine vigilance—but he went forth to regulate his life without reference to the will of God. He became the leader of that great mass of mankind living in a measure of satisfaction, enjoying the arts, crafts and commerce of this world; but living in utter independence of God.

Cain is a remarkable type of the Jew for the guilt of fratricide constituted him an outcast and a vagabond, of easy recognition, the hand of mankind against him; yet providentially protected and preserved by God.

While in chapter 5 we have brought into view the line of promise, in chapter 6 we see such men—for so I understand the term sons of God here—entering into alliance with the daughters of men. Becoming tired of their separatist tradition, they entered into union with those who had left God out of their life. Physically the union was a great success; morally and spiritually it was a dread disaster. The violence and corruption which soon pervaded society was such that God was compelled to purge the earth by a flood, overwhelming scientific evidence of which has awaited our day in the discoveries of Woolley and Langston.

With the resulting trifurcation of the human race in the descendants of Noah, we have the divine explanation of these fundamental ethnographical divisions of mankind—the yellow, black and white races of the earth.

And thus have we the history of the race covering some two thousand years, compressed into the compass of ten short chapters in the Divine narrative, a story of generation and of degeneration.

## **2. From the Call of Abraham to the Death of Christ**

Scriptures:—Genesis 12:1-3; Exodus 19:4-9; Deuteronomy 30:1-8; 1 Samuel 8:7; 2 Samuel 7:12-16; Galatians 3:16 to end.

To any one who reflects considerately, it comes as an astonishing thought that the Spirit of God has disposed probably of some 2,000 years of human history—or about one-third of the total from its inception to the present day—in eleven short chapters of the sacred record. The entire remainder of the Old Testament, and in consequence the great bulk of this revelation from God, is devoted to a second third of the history, not exactly of mankind, but of a people chosen of God. For, it is worth remembering, that while at the time of Abram's call there were many nationalities upon earth, mankind is up to this point regarded as of one stock, whereas from the epoch of this call, onward to the death of Christ, God regards mankind as divisible into two stocks—Jew and Gentile. With the ascension of Christ, the consequent descent of the Holy Spirit, and the formation of the church upon earth by the baptism of the Spirit, the classification has become three-fold—Jew, Gentile and the Church of God—and in the age to come the twofold distinction of Jew and Gentile will be re-established.

In the period under consideration we have then, the history of one nation, other nations coming under review only, incidentally and in virtue of their relationships with Israel. Of Israel the Psalmist could say "God has not dealt so with any nation." The Jew is indeed an enigma only explained in the light of the Scriptures while he is himself an authentication of the scriptural records as the Word of God. Even the infidel Renan was obliged to write "The philosophy of history fails utterly to account for the Jew."

The operation of the law of degeneracy, apparently relentless and inexorable in the case of all other ancient nations has left the Jew untouched. Despoiled, dispossessed, dispersed, distressed, the nation has nevertheless survived, and while failing to occupy that magnificent place of beneficent primacy among the nations to which obedience to God would have raised it, the influence of its people among the nations whither they have sought refuge, compels attention and demands explanation. The only reasonable explanation is provided by revelation, and it may be well here to review succinctly the Old Testament history of this unique nation. That history has its origin in the Call and obedience of Abraham, the first Hebrew. There follows the Patriarchal Period, that age of promise with which most of us have been made familiar at Sunday School, embracing the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, and covering the period from the appearance of the God of glory to Abraham, to the servitude in Egypt. The lives of these patriarchs throb with human interest, and set forth various characteristics of God's elect in all ages—Abraham exhibiting faith and faithfulness, Isaac—sonship, Jacob—pilgrimage, and Joseph—suffering ending in exaltation and glory.

For some two and a half centuries the descendants of Jacob suffered the ignominy and hardships of slavery in Egypt until God raised up that prophet, mighty in word and in

deed, accrediting him by mighty works, to deliver His people. Under the leadership of Moses, God led the people out as a nation. This is the great event designated the Exodus. He led them out that He might lead them in to the land promised to Abraham and his seed in an unconditional covenant. And if today we see the Holy City trodden underfoot of the Gentiles, it is only until the times of the Gentiles is completed. There is in the purposes of God an inseparable connection between His chosen people Israel and that land of promise.

After 40 years of wandering God brought them again to the very point of failure, to Kadesh-Barnea bordering upon the land and prepared their hearts making them willing to enter upon their possessions. They entered under Joshua and in the land there followed the phase of their national life known as the Times of the Judges. The government was in fact a theocracy, administered at first through elders, but subsequently in the days of national declension and when the enemies of Israel made their power felt, exercised by men of courage and ability raised up as special deliverers and known as Judges. Some fifteen of these ruled, from Othniel to Samuel the prophet-judge and including such well-known names as Gideon, Barak, Samson and Deborah, a woman.

Influenced by the nations round about, the people became dissatisfied with an invisible King, and approached Samuel with the desire that a king should be set over them. "But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said, Give us a king to judge us. And Samuel prayed unto the Lord. And the Lord said unto Samuel, Harken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee, for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them." Thus there was inaugurated The Monarchial Period commencing with the reign of Saul and reaching its highest glory under David and Solomon.

In the days of Rehoboam, Solomon's son, the people revoked against the burden of taxation, and there commenced the period of the Divided Monarchy, two tribes remaining loyal to the throne of David and retaining Jerusalem as capital and the temple as the centre of their worship, and ten tribes breaking way under Jeroboam to form the Northern Kingdom, his seat being at Shechem and centres of idolatry being established at Bethel and at Dan. The history of the divided Monarchy is the story of endless feuds between Israel and Judah; it is the sordid story of gross idolatry leading to the captivity of Israel and the servitude of Judah. It is a period the darkness of which is only relieved by the illustrious ministry of the prophets.

With the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in the days of Jehoiachim, King of Judah, there began that period known in Scripture as The Times of the Gentiles. This period, continuing until this present hour, has served to display all the God-like qualities of man and all his bestial propensities. Every form of human government

from the most absolute monarchy to complete democracy has been tried and has been found wanting, and the end will come as with a flood, when the stone cut out without hands strikes the image, as seen by Nebuchadnezzar, and it falls in ruin.

After seventy years a remnant of Jews under Nehemiah and Ezra returned to rebuild the city and the temple. The remnant was never wholly free from Gentile domination, but remained in the land until the dispersion under the Roman Titus in the year 70 A.D. following their rejection of Christ their proffered King. The history of the Jew from then onward to the present hour, scattered, peeled, persecuted, has been the literal fulfilment of the prophecies of cursing and blasting consequent upon disobedience to God.

### **3. The Age of Grace**

Calvary marks the true division between the Old Testament and the New. The recognition of this elementary truth goes far to get rid of confusion of thought concerning the mission of Christ and His teaching.

God, who since the days of His servant Malachi, had kept silence for some 400 years, spoke again through John the Baptist, the messenger sent before the Lord to make straight His paths. The Old Testament prophets foresaw this dawning of a day of glory for the earth when Israel's King would sit upon the throne and administer blessing to the world. A day when economic inequalities would be levelled out; when the inspiration of the King's presence and the knowledge of God characterising the least as well as the greatest would be features of an age of righteousness and peace fraught with richest blessing not for man alone but for the whole groaning creation. When we turn to the first page of the New Testament we find an account of the birth of Him who was Son of David and Son of Abraham, and who had come as "a minister of circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers."

While it is probable that we have been taught to regard the Gospels as the simplest of the New Testament books, it is the case that they are complicated beyond all others, and real spiritual insight is needed to distinguish between things that differ in them. With Christ upon earth, a man amongst men, subject to the demands of law, the Age of Law had not as yet passed. Where all others had only dishonoured God and broken His law, Christ was here to glorify Him by walking in a pathway of undeviating obedience to His will. With the King here in person, a bona fide offer of a Kingdom and Kingship was made to the nation of Israel; but the King being refused the Kingdom was postponed; and until His death the Age of Grace could not be inaugurated. Transcending in His words the law of Moses, and yet as identified with the nation submitting to its claims, and as perfect man honouring God's law in every detail; presenting in the Sermon on the Mount the manifesto of the King, and yet for the glory

of God, “and that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy” permitting the nation’s derisive rejection of His kingly claims, as evidenced in the crown of thorns and in their cry “We will not have this man to reign over us.” We find Him completely misunderstood in His own day and know that the centuries have not dispelled the grossness of man’s ignorance.

How easily and how well the disciples sent out by the Master apprehended the import of the message “Go not into the way of the Gentiles and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as ye go preach say, The Kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The whole dynamic of their national hope and training lay behind their message. By way of contrast, how slow were they to take in the significance of the cross and the import of the resurrection. Even after the blessed Lord had companied with them forty days after His resurrection, instructing them in things pertaining to the Kingdom of God, their supreme inquiry was this, “Lord wilt thou at this time restore again the Kingdom to Israel?” But it was not given to them to know the times or the seasons pertaining to Israel’s blessing.

As we have already remarked Israel derisively rejected her King and crucified Him and this rejection involved the postponement of the promises made to the fathers. It was in the upper room on the very eve of His betrayal that the Lord spoke to His own of a New commandment. And on the same occasion, as indicative of the changed relations for His disciples, He said, “But this cometh to pass that the word might be fulfilled in their law (not your law), they hated me without a cause.” Their inexcusable hatred, their senseless repudiation of His claims, culminating at Calvary, terminate the Age of Law. Man is no longer under law or probation. Nor is man, as such, under grace. He is under sin.

It is, of course, true that in all the ways of our Lord we see grace and truth manifested, for we are privileged to behold “His glory, full of grace and truth.” But the supreme display of grace, the very thing which made the exhibition of Divine grace to men possible, was the cross of Christ. For grace is the unmerited favour of God, dispensed in righteousness. Grace is not merely favour, it is help. It is not merely an attitude, it is action. It is divine favour, proved by His gift. The grace of God in Christ which is Sovereign grace, is saving grace. From the outset to the end, salvation is of the Lord. The Apostle writing to Titus declares “The grace of God, that bringeth salvation, hath appeared to all men, teaching us that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world: looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.” This comprehensive declaration, in a sense embraces the scope of the New Testament. “The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared,” covers the Gospels and the Acts: the teachings of grace setting forth the suitable walk, form the content of the Epistles, while the glorious appearing is the outstanding theme of the

## Revelation.

Let us again remind our souls that salvation is of the Lord. Grace it was that proposed salvation: grace that purchased it: grace that proclaimed it. No works, no effort, no merit of man effected or elicited it. Our need or demerit provided the occasion for its display, although the love and wisdom that purposed and planned blessing for man were antecedent to man's need and had their origin before the foundation of the world, as we read "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies in Christ, according as He hath chosen us in Him, before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love." All is of God. As in creation, the order is "In the beginning God" and God, through the Spirit, has been careful in all the teachings of grace to preserve this order—first, the blessing and then the obligation, first doctrine then duty, first revelation and then responsibility. "We are His workmanship, created unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." Satan has ever sought to confuse the simple at this very point by pressing the responsibility of suitable walk before there has been a clear apprehension of standing in Christ. The teachings of grace are not for the promiscuous multitudes but for those who have been quickened together with Christ, and saved by grace. Only grave harm can be done by presenting Christian responsibilities to mixed congregations of saved and unsaved as if applicable equally to all. Just as the requirements of the law were imposed upon a peculiar people during a divinely appointed period, so the teachings of grace are for a peculiar people for a limited period. Meantime the appeal to the unbeliever is not for an unproved manner of life but to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Under grace we have not only a new standing as "accepted in the beloved" but every condition in the new life being supernatural we have, thank God, a new sufficiency. Human limitations have been perfectly provided for by the indwelling of the Spirit of God, the believers' enablement for all the responsibilities of the pathway. While as we have already emphasised, the believer is in no sense under law, it is nevertheless true that all the moral values of the Law are carried into this Age of Grace and restated in terms of grace. For example at Lystra, the apostles exhorted the people that they "should turn aside from these vanities unto the living God." John's first Epistle, probably the last to be written, concluded with these words, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols." If these be indeed the last words penned, then the book of inspiration opens, "In the beginning God," and ends with the exhortation, "Keep yourselves from other gods." James in his Epistle has not merely exhorted us not to take the name of the Lord God in vain, but instructs "Swear not at all." Children in the Lord are reminded by the apostle Paul to honour father and mother. "No murderer," says John, "hath eternal life abiding in him." To the Ephesians, Paul writes "Let him that stole, steal no more," and to the Colossians. "Lie not one to another"; while in the exalted epistle to the Ephesians he exhorts against covetousness. The only

commandment of the ten, not restated under terms of grace is the fourth, "Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy." "This" then "is a faithful saying and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God, might be careful to maintain good works." Works, yes, but not with a view to securing God's favour, but because so richly blessed, for remember, "Ye are not under law, but under grace."

In conclusion let me remind you most briefly that God has a new purpose in this Age of Grace. From both Jew and Gentile He is taking out a people for His name. This heavenly body, the church, spoken of in anticipation by Christ Himself, awaited its existence for the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ and the consequent descent of the Holy Spirit. Originating at Pentecost it is growing or increasing during this age until perfection of stature be reached, when the church completed, we shall each one be changed into the image of Christ and collectively as His bride be with Him for ever. Meantime the promises to Israel are delayed, but the church's hope and prospect of the coming Christ being realised, the Age of Grace consummated. God will again deal with that nation to whom pertain the Covenants and the promise.