

LIVING IN THE NOW AS WELL AS IN ETERNITY

Dr Michael Beck, Grace Theological College Old Testament lecturer

If I asked you to tell me about the doctrine of the two ages, could you do it? Or is it something best left to the professionals? It is easy to see why. Books on the subject are often very technical. And we are all busy. So, is it even worth your time to investigate this? With all my heart, I would urge that it is.

Why does it matter? For example, how does it help me to thrive in my marriage? Similarly, how does it help me to see the value in my other relationships? I'll come back to this later.

In the simplest terms, the two ages in Scripture refer to (1) this present age--an age that ends at the return of Christ, and (2) the age to come--an age that continues for all eternity. The two-age concept is one of the very first things we encounter in the Bible. In the opening story of Genesis, we not only learn that God created all things but also that He promised Adam an eternal Sabbath, a promise that was contingent on his worthiness as a representative of humanity.

As we know, Adam gave in to sin and rebelled against God. He was not worthy. As a result, after the fall, the present age became defined by sin, suffering and death. Further, any hope of a Sabbath age became utterly unattainable without the merciful intervention of God.

Thankfully, that is not the end of the story. In Genesis 3:15, God promised that, despite Adam's failure, His ultimate plan for humanity would not be thwarted. Instead, it would be a story of redemption. A story of how the promised Sabbath age would yet be attained, now no longer because of the worthiness of the first Adam, but because of the worthiness of the last Adam. From this point, each step in the story is propelled forward by "Adam" figures, people like Noah, Moses, and David. People that God raised up to show how He would accomplish our salvation. As we know, these figures ultimately pointed towards Jesus and taught us what He would do to both rescue us from our current predicament as well as bring us with him into the Sabbath age to come.

When Jesus began his ministry, not only did he frequently teach about the coming age, but, through his miracles, he also showed us many glimpses of what it would be like. It would be an age that would do away with all suffering, sin, and death. Further, it would display a great defeat over the enemy (the enemy of God and his people?). However, as great as these pictures were, during this time Jesus was accomplishing something greater still--an actual entrance into this age; an actual and abiding foretaste of this Sabbath reality for any and all who come to him.

Don't miss this: what I am saying is that, while we will certainly see the final triumph of Christ and the entry of His people into the new creation, it is equally true that, since Jesus' ascent to glory, that end *has already begun*. So, while the age to come has yet to be consummated, at the same time, it has *already* been inaugurated.

What does this mean for you? It means that, as a Christian, you now live in the great overlap of these two ages. Even if you are not aware of it, every step you take in this life has one foot in this present (but ending) age and another foot in the present (but eternal) age. It means that you face a unique tension. On the one hand, you have to walk in an age characterised by sin. Even on your best day, you must continue to struggle against your own fallenness. But it also means that, no matter the severity of your day-to-day struggle, your status as a citizen of the age to come is never in jeopardy. No matter how dire things might seem as you struggle along, we are now, already, dual citizens. As Luther put it, we are *simul justus et peccator* (at once justified and a sinner).

We cannot escape the tension of living simultaneously in two ages. We try all manner of ways to ease the tension but there is no escaping it. So, when a fellow brother or sister in Christ is having a difficult time, we need to remember that they are at the coal face of this tension. Nothing works the way it should. We were created to live in a perfect world with perfect relationships and look what we ended up with!

Christian marriage and relationships with other believers are examples for this never ceasing call to endure the tension and be faithful. There are times in our relationships that we taste something of the age to come, but other times when it quickly degenerates into difficulty and discouragement. This is where we need each to remind ourselves of what we so easily forgot in the midst of this tension, that the gospel is for Christians their way back to tasting more of the age to come (2 Peter 1:9-11).

One can see how failure to comprehend the above tension can easily result in problems ranging from triumphalism (forgetting that one foot is still in this age) to defeatism (forgetting that one foot is already in the age to come). But, more immediately, it means that we miss out on the daily encouragement that this doctrine gives. At very least, we can say with full conviction that this is not an obscure concept for scholars and theologians. It is a crucial and life-giving doctrine for all Christians. Not only does it help us interpret and understand the story of the Bible, but it also clarifies our current, highly privileged position in this story.