

The Fullness of Time

Galatians 4:1-7

Series: “Christmas in the Epistles” (Christmas Series 2020)

Preaching Date: December 24, 2020

Worship: “Silent Night”

Key Sentence: In the incarnation the fullness of God’s time was reached

Outline:

I. The time of preparation (Galatians 4:1-3)

II. The time of culmination (Galatians 4:4-5)

III. The time of fulfillment (Galatians 4:6-7)

Galatians 4:1-7 I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, ²but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. ³In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.

⁴But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

⁶And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” ⁷So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

The Fullness of Time Galatians 4:1-7

When a child will be born isn't an easy thing to predict. The traditional figure of nine months is a loose average, as is 38 weeks. A recent study pegged the average pregnancy at 268 days, or just two days longer than 38 weeks. But it's too precise. The range of pregnancies for fully developed babies in that study was from 250 days to 286 days. On top of that, scientists don't know what triggers labor. They can record a flood of hormonal changes that occur when labor starts, but they don't know what kicks off the hormones. All in all it's a pretty inexact science, as any new mom will tell you.

Which makes every birth and every child memorable. Gail and I had four birth children, and each birth had its surprises. Bethany was born at Clear Lake Hospital, but we had already decided we wanted to labor mostly at home. We didn't know from any experience the difference between early labor, active labor and transitional labor. By the time we decided to go to the hospital, labor was pretty far along, and when we walked in the desk nurse took one look at Gail said something like "don't stop, get up to labor and delivery." Bethany was born less than an hour after we arrived. How were we to know?

Abigail was not born at a hospital, but at a free standing birth center. We went down to the birth center one afternoon, thinking Gail was in active labor, but it petered out. The midwife said "Get something to eat, move around, maybe it will restart." We went to a nearby Denny's and the waitress happened to ask "When is your baby due?" "I looked casually at my wrist and said "three or four hours." Fastest service I've ever gotten at a Denny's, and she was born that night. Hannah, on the other hand, was our first home birth. It was fantastic, textbook, with everyone in place. They had every reason to be, since she was two weeks late. The funny part was when we went to the midwife for a routine check a week after Gail's due date. When Gail moaned about how late it was going, the midwife looked at her and said, "Yeah, it's hopeless. You'll be pregnant forever." Way to make a woman cry.

But Ruth's birth was the one that was really timed. It was my first semester of seminary, and she could easily have come during finals. But she didn't. She was just late enough to get into the Christmas break. But seminary was in Illinois, and it was cold that year. Twenty below zero. One day, Gail had some labor, and the midwife came out, but that didn't go anywhere. The next day we had a power failure, and worried a lot about trying to give birth in a freezing house. But the power came on late in the day.

That night, still twenty below zero, Gail gets up for a routine trip to the bathroom and comes back saying “I think this is it.” So I start making phone calls. The midwife says “It’s going to take me a long time to get out there.” The nurse says “I’m stuck, my car will not start.” The backup nurse says “I’ll come, but my husband and I just got back from this father’s deathbed.” I’m like, no, you stay home. So Gail and I ended up doing Ruth’s birth by ourselves. I don’t have time to tell you all the ways God prepared us for that or why she was born under the Christmas tree, but it’s one of our great memories.

God’s timing is awesome. He brought our birth children at just the right time. Also our adopted children, but that’s for later. Here on Christmas Eve we celebrate that God also brought Jesus at just the right time to accomplish his purposes long prepared. Galatians 4:1-7 is Paul’s teaching of that truth. Let’s read the text. Galatians 4:1-7 *I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, ²but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. ³In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. ⁴But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. ⁶And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” ⁷So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.*

Verses 1-3 show the time of preparation for Christmas, what we would call the Old Testament times, when God’s people were under the authority of God’s law. In chapter 3 Paul had said that law held God’s people captive, but was also a tutor, showing them what was right. Now Paul compares the law to the guardians or stewards who cared for the children in a Roman household. A child was effectively enslaved to these caregivers until a time set by the father. James Montgomery Boice says “a Roman child became an adult at a family festival known as the Liberalia. The child was formally adopted by the father as son and heir.” This ceremony, while usually applied to birth children, was equally valid for an orphan brought into the family. But when the child was a minor law his status was no different from that of a slave. Paul applies this illustration to the basic human condition of both Jewish people and Gentiles prior to the coming of Christ. Verse 3: In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.

What are these elementary principles? The Greek word that Paul uses is “stoicheia,” which can mean “elements,” in the same way we speak of chemical elements. We have a branch of chemistry called stoichiometry. In ancient times, the basic elements were earth, fire, air, and water and were associated with gods.

In Paul's time stoicheia also referred to the sun, moon, stars, and planets, all of them seen as gods or goddesses. In other words, Paul is saying that while Jews were in bondage to the law, Gentiles were in bondage to the gods. Todd Wilson, in his commentary on Galatians says "Let me give you three [examples]: money, sex, and power. These 'elementary principles of the world' are incredibly powerful, so powerful, in fact, that sinful creatures like you and me are constantly tempted to turn them into idols and then worship them as gods."

Our addictions, characteristic sins and destructive habits enslave us. Our culture is full of addictions like alcohol and drugs. We've also got characteristic sins like anger and lust, greed and selfishness, which enslave us like any addiction. This is what Paul describes in Romans 7: "For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing." That's enslavement. Finally we have new addictions, a result of new technology. Many now say that media in all forms, with social media at the apex, can be psychologically and even physiologically addictive and harmful to ourselves and others. These addictions lead to guilt and shame as the law and our consciences accuse us whenever the addiction compels us to sin. "Oh miserable people that we are, who will save us from this body of death?"

The answer is Christmas The answer is Jesus. Paul says in Romans "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." He says here in verses 4 and 5: *But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.* The great thing, the Christmas Eve thing, about these verses is "the fullness of time," "when the fullness of time had come." In context this points back to verse 3, "the date set by his father." All the plans God had made, all the provisions he had made, all the promises he had made came together to make that first Christmas Eve the perfect time for the arrival of that baby who would save the world.

This was the perfect time in God's redemptive history. He promised a victory over sin and Satan as early as Genesis 3:15. He'd chosen people through Abraham, who was declared righteous by his faith. He'd rescued Abraham's descendants from Egypt by the blood of the Passover lamb. He'd given them the moral law which brought awareness of sin and the sacrificial system which showed how God would deal with it. He'd given a kingdom and promises of one to reign on David's throne forever. He had taken the nation into exile where they at last learned to forsake idolatry. He had given them the prophets and revealed the kingdom over which the Messiah would reign, and the suffering that would precede it. The time for Messiah had come in redemptive history.

The time had also come in world history. This is so fascinating. The conquest of Israel, the northern kingdom, by Assyria and the conquest of Judah, the southern kingdom, by Babylon had spread Jewish monotheism throughout the polytheistic pagan world. And at the time of Jesus' coming both the Greek and Roman cultures were increasingly disillusioned by their lead-footed and immoral pantheon of gods and idols, who were powerless despite the ravings of their priestly publicity agents. A religion of one true God and one effective sacrifice was uniquely appealing to the masses of Roman and Greek cultures, and there were few cities without a synagogue and Gentile God-fearers.

These cultures had contributed much to the perfect preparation of the world. Greek culture came first, spreading philosophy and art across the Mediterranean world and into Africa and India. Greek culture had created a universal trade language, Koine Greek, which was spoken and written by all, even those like the Jews and the Romans who retained their own languages. Descended from classical Greek, Koine retained a marvelous subtlety and capacity of expression almost unrivaled by any other widespread tongue. Then came the Romans, who conquered all that Greece had prepared, and ruled it with an iron hand, so that the Jews at least, were completely ready for a Messiah to come and rescue them from oppression. But Rome had also imposed a peace, the "Pax Romana," which, for centuries, suppressed all kinds of wars and national rivalries throughout the empire. Trade and travel abounded on the marvelous system of straight, paved military roads Rome had created.

I could go on, but I hope this brief sketch stretches your imagination to appreciate how perfectly God prepared everything for the fullness of time so that a baby, born to a peasant woman, born under the Jewish law could change everything.

Why did God do all this? To redeem, to buy back from bondage. Jesus was born under the law and only he ever fully obeyed it. But he went further than that. He not only satisfied the law's demands for himself, he also redeemed those under the law. 'Redeem' is the key word. We're bought back from slavery to sin, slavery to the law, slavery to self and its addictions. We have chains on chains on chains that bind and imprison us. But now, in the fullness of time, Christ has come, and paid the price we owed, paid with his blood, through which, Paul says, "we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." We know several people who have done overseas adoptions, including Luke and Donna Reed. Donna once told me about a conversation that took place among adoptive parents who felt it was terrible that places like Kazakhstan made the cost so high to rescue their children from misery and poverty. But another parent said it was simply the cost of redemption, and no cost is too high to redeem a life. Jesus knew the cost of our redemption and paid it in blood.

Finally, having been bought with a price, we receive adoption as God's daughters and sons. In J.I. Packer's classic *Knowing God* I once noticed that the chapter on "Sons of God" was the longest of all his chapters. He had more to say about adoption than about God's sovereignty, grace, love, anything. "Adoption," he says "is the highest privilege the gospel offers." Justification is the primary, fundamental blessing, but adoption is higher because of the richer relationship with God it involves. "Justification," he says, "is a forensic, or legal idea, but adoption is a family idea." To be right with God the judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is greater. At Christmas God sent his Son that we might become his adopted sons and daughters.

Paul spells out the benefits of adoption in verses 6-7 *And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"*⁷ *So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.* Here are three benefits of adoption, which is itself a benefit of redemption, which is itself a benefit of the fullness of time when God sent his Son. What are these benefits? First, we have the Holy Spirit to dwell with us. Jesus was Immanuel, God with us, in the stable at Christmas. But the Holy Spirit is Immanuel, God with us today. He comforts us, strengthens us, gives us words to say and to pray, He guides, convicts, commends. He sanctifies us, transforming us, over time, from the image of fallen natural man, to the image of Christ.

The second benefit of adoption follows from the first. The Spirit who lives in us leads us to cry out "Abba, Father," We are helpless children, and God is our loving, caring father. Paul says in Romans 8: "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." Todd Wilson says that this is a cry of intimacy and dependence.

The only other person in Scripture who addresses God this way is Jesus. This is his cry in the garden of Gethsemane, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." "Abba! Father!" is the Son's cry of distress, his way of addressing his Father in his time of greatest need. And because God sends the Spirit of Christ into the hearts of every one of his adopted children, they learn to cry this same cry when they're in a time of need. It's not that God's children have fewer challenges, don't grieve or experience disappointment. But as they go through these things, they cry out to God as Father and they have the confidence of children. This has been a good thing to remember in our turbulent 2020. Because God sent his Son to give reconciliation, we can confidently cry out to him in all circumstances. It'll be a good thing to remember in 2021 as well.

The third benefit of adoption is inheritance. Verse 7: So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir. Again, Packer describes this well. “New Testament Christianity is a religion of hope, a faith that looks forward. For the Christian, the best is always yet to be. But how can we form any notion of that which awaits us at the end of road? Here the doctrine of adoption comes to our aid. To start with, it teaches us to think of our hope not as a possibility, or even a likelihood, but as a guaranteed certainty because it is a promised inheritance. God’s adoption makes us His heirs, and so guarantees to us the inheritance he has in store for us.”

We were slaves and orphans, but in the fullness of time God sent his Son to redeem us from sin and from slavery, and to give us the gift of adoption as sons and daughters in God’s family. Because of Jesus we now have the Holy Spirit who teaches our hearts to own that truth, to cry out “Abba Father” to the God of the universe, who loves us with an everlasting love and a father’s heart.

Let me close this Christmas Eve message with a few more personal reflections on the way God gives children in the fullness of time. I’ve told you of the four birth children, but what of the others in our family? Just as God carefully timed the arrival of our birth children, and just as he carefully prepared for the arrival of Christ, so also he carefully prepared the circumstances and the time for the arrival of our adopted children, and so also he has carefully prepared for the arrival of each of his redeemed and adopted sons and daughters.

Gail and I tried for several years to begin adopting children. We had trouble with a couple of agencies, and we had a long investment in foster care for a little boy named Alex that we finally decided couldn’t be an adoption. In the meantime Tina and Michael were in the custody of Texas Child and Protective Services, in foster care. That was not a positive experience, and it built on a bunch of hurt and brokenness they’d already experienced. One of worst moments was when a couple agreed to adopt them, took them for a weekend, but couldn’t hack it and backed out. God never does that. He adopts us unconditionally, no matter how much of a struggle we face as we become part of his family.

But all that led to the perfect timing of their adoption. We first heard about Tina and Michael during the summer of 2000. We got some paperwork and began to pray about whether God intended them for our family. Several things convinced us he did. Take this picture for example. I think I’ve talked about it before. This was drawn by our oldest daughter Bethany, and it depicts our family, Bethany, Abbie, Hannah, with the blonde hair, and Ruth, with two other little dark haired children, quite obviously Tina and Michael.

But the picture was drawn before we even knew about them. God had literally given Bethany a vision for our future family, in a way similar, but less authoritative, to the way he gave the prophets knowledge of the child who would be born in Bethlehem. One other piece of God's timing was that we first met Tina and Michael on Tina's fourth birthday, August 21st, 2000 and we took them out of foster care to begin living with us on August 31st, Michael's third birthday.

Johnny and Bobby, who are not legally adopted but are still God's gifts to us, also came in the fullness of time. Their mom, Laura Pinard, was diagnosed with cancer, and lived only about six weeks. Toward the end she asked Gail and me, out of the blue, to take care and parent her teenaged boys, and to become their legal guardians. That last was legally impossible, and it never happened, but God allowed all kinds of other things to happen in the nick of time, over and over that allowed them to be and remain part of our family. Someday I'm going to write down that story. It's an amazing testimony of God's work. More recently Katrina Welch has become part of our family. Last Thanksgiving and Christmas God did a number of things to place Kat in our home through the whole holiday, even though she was supposed to go to Minnesota and other places. It was, again, a fullness of time that couldn't have happened before, probably couldn't have happened since.

But all these examples, dear though they are to us, pale in comparison to what God did for all of us, in the fullness of time when he sent his Son, born of Mary, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons and daughters. That's what Christmas is all about.