

The Fullness of Time

Galatians 4:4-7

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Randy Lovelace

(to musicians) Praise be to God. Thank you so much.

My apologies—I have to drink water this morning. Between last night's service and this morning I'm not doing well, so I don't want to lose my voice, right? So hang with me.

This morning the passage that we will look at is one that we've already read and had read for us as the lead up to our time of confession and the giving of the promise of forgiveness. You'll see it in Galatians Chapter 4; it is verses 4-7. Hear now God's Word.

⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. ⁶ 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.

This is the Word of God. (Thanks be to God.) Pray with me. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this, your Word. Now open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your Word. Help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Sometimes, I believe, as a pastor and as a Christian, firstly, that the Lord does work by his Spirit to bring what is on the surface of things seemingly coincidences, but in retrospect you see how they are divine appointments. I had a lunch appointment this week with a friend who came down with largely probably what I have this morning. He had to cancel our lunch, and that text came in while I was in the office of a friend. I kid you not, thirty seconds after I received the text from my friend having to cancel, my friend sitting across the table from me said: Hey, do you want to grab lunch? I said sure, that would be great. My friend is Jewish. He comes from a prominent Jewish family. His father was a rather influential and famous rabbi in the city of Chicago. We've become friends, hit it off at the beginning—he knowing that I'm a Christian and a pastor, to boot; I knowing that he's Jewish, and maybe Jewish and having a hard time even believing in the existence of God. But nonetheless we've become friends. We've found a way to work together, but we've not had lunch together, so we grab lunch together.

And while sitting across the table, within the first three minutes he looks to me and he says: So I have a question. (Here we go. This will be fun. This is kind of fun, right?) So he says: Why do you think we waited so long or it took so long for Jesus to come on the scene? Why would God have done it then? And I said to him that is an excellent question, and I have no idea. We don't. We don't know the why; we only know the what.

But we see in this text that for Paul he recognizes what we can only see in retrospect. "In the fullness of time," the passage says. "When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." Well, from the giving of the Law to Moses to Jesus's birth is round about 1300 years. Why that long? Great question. I have no idea.

But what historians have seemingly put forth is something worth considering. First, one could certainly point to the cultural and political context of the day. Rome was largely in charge of what was the known world. In addition to that, the Greek language and the culture that was transmitted with that language was bringing together what were, at one point, disparate parts of the world, because of the Roman roads and the guards who looked over those roads to guard trade. In addition to that, you not only had this massive progress that was happening because of the amazing power of the Roman Empire, some historians actually suggest that because of this progressive movement and growth, the old religion of Roman gods and Greek gods was losing their hold. It just didn't quite mean what it used to mean.

Israel for its part was also in an unusual state or at least certainly in a weary state. Because of Roman oppression they were weary. But what we also learn through the public ministry of Jesus is that, in fact, they were also weary not just of Roman occupation, they were clearly weary of the religious rites and obligations that had to be adhered to. Not just the ones that we read in the Old Testament in the Law, but also the entire oral tradition that grew up around the written law. It was and felt like a noose around one's neck. And so there was political cultural and even religious weariness.

But absolutely nothing could have prepared the world or even threatened the world like God doing something in public, something so public as giving of his Son to be born with a virgin woman. It was a complete challenge to Herod. It was a complete challenge to Jerusalem. But Paul tells us two things. That when the fullness of time had come, God did two things and did it for two reasons, he tells us: "to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." So those two things: **to redeem and to give the power to become children of God**. I know, I know what it says: 'sons.' But Paul knows that in the gospel there is no difference between male or female. It's speaking of sons, and if we remove sons, we remove the power of the gospel, because what it's saying, then, for men and women, boys and girls alike, without preferential treatment, in Christ all are co-heirs with Christ. And so Paul is saying here we all become sons of God as we receive the gift of Christ. But these two things.

The first: **to redeem those** who are under the weight of the law. Because what it was required, not only for the Jew, but also for the Gentile. The Gentiles were not allowed to even come into the most central part of the religion of Israel unless they were willing to abide by all the external rites and rules that would become the problem after Christ had come and in the early church, even in Galatia. How much did they have to do? Well, it was certainly a huge noose around their necks before they were converted.

The same is also the case for the Jews. Just the text that we considered last night, that a mother was considered impure for forty days after giving birth and would then, with her husband, have to go to the temple to offer a sacrifice, as Mary and Joseph did. Now they were prescribed by law to provide a lamb, but if they were poor, as Mary and Joseph were, they could offer two turtle doves, to offer as a sin offering for the forgiveness of sins. Now think about that, mothers. Year after year, birth after birth, Day of Atonement after Day of Atonement, Passover after Passover. All of these rules and all of their oral tradition had to be followed. It is a noose around the neck.

Because it does two things, both of which are deadly. On the one hand, it demonstrates how sinful we are and how holy God's righteousness is. But it also has a creepy aspect to it, in that it

somehow tempts us into believing if we obey them, then that will be enough. But here's the problem. You ever tried to obey it? Even a contemporary writer who decided to try to obey all the law for one full year and then wrote a book about it found out how hard it was. It is impossible to do, because it was meant to always drive us to the Lord. And so it could only do so as Christ came.

But consider this for a moment. Stephen Charnock, an old writer and pastor, said these words. "What a wonder that two natures infinitely distant should be more intimately united than anything in the world. That the same person [this is Jesus], that the same person should have both a glory and a grief, an infinite joy in the deity and an inexpressible sorrow in the humanity; that a God upon a throne should be an infant in a cradle; that the thundering Creator be a weeping babe and a suffering man." The Incarnation astonishes, because men upon earth and angels in heaven glory to look at such things. That all of humanity under the law, the righteousness of God, God comes in the flesh. And even when Jesus was born, his very birth was under the threat of a death sentence issued by Herod. His life, his earthly life would have around it the parentheses of a death sentence. His birth and ultimately his cross. That God would stoop so low to be fully God and fully man.

But here's the beauty. God recognizes that the law is a noose around our neck, and yet Jesus was born under the law. Jesus, the one who was innocent, fully obedient, would come and obey all of it. Jesus, who had all the glory and sitting at the right hand of God The Father, gave up the glory to become like you and me, as ones under the law. To walk in our streets, to walk in our lives, and to know every way that we are acquainted with grief and suffering and temptation, and yet not disobey and to be faithful, never arrogant, always loving, always merciful. This is Jesus—fully God, fully man—two natures infinitely distant becoming immediately and intimately one, united in his life. He did this so he could redeem us. Jesus, the Father knew, would be the one through whom we could stand by faith and say we are justified. We are free from the death sentence of the law. We are free from being under its weight, knowing that Christ on our behalf has obeyed it fully.

That is good news, but it's not all the good news. I fear that many Christians, and particularly many Christians who are of the Presbyterian and reformed tradition, stop with justification. And when we do stop with justification, we turn or make Christianity into a transactional exchange alone. Because it is that. Our sin put upon Christ; Christ's obedience and righteousness placed upon us. The great exchange for our justification—being made righteous and holy before God as if we had obeyed the entire law. Praise be to God. But that is not all he did. And if we stop there, then we miss going to the heart of the gospel. You can't have it without justification, but if you have only justification, then you miss out on the beauty and intimacy of the gospel.

Paul tells us when he says, "to redeem those who are under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." This is the second thing: **The power to become children**. Love so amazing that God would do more than just justification. Think about it for just a moment. God could have been divinely speaking, like Abraham Lincoln in the Emancipation Proclamation. He did a great thing, announcing the emancipation of the horrible slavery that was bound up in our country's history. But he couldn't make everybody his children, could he. He could announce freedom, but he couldn't make them his children. God in Christ not only sets us free from the slavery of the law, he makes us children. That is what is remarkable. For this: the Gospel is

more, as I said, than a transaction or an exchange. It is about becoming new. It's about becoming adopted. It's about enjoying what it means to be the children of God.

And imagine for just a moment with your imagination, when Jesus prays in John Chapter 17, how much Jesus loves the Father, and how much the Father loves Jesus. Imagine Jesus at his birth, how much the Father loves his precious Son. The angels would declare, people would travel from around and recognize that this is the cradle of God, born of woman, and yet fully God. God loves the preciousness and the beauty of his Son. Well friends, the truth of the Gospel that Paul preaches here is that as much love as God has for the preciousness of his Son, so is the same love given to you. Friends, it is more than justification. It is the most powerful, most intimate, most cage-rattling truth—that God loves us to the bottom, and he knows us and every way we are, and he loves us still. And he will always say to you: You are my precious son, you are my precious daughter, you are my children—having received my Son.

As I've said over the last two weeks I'll repeat again. Just as they sang and blessed the birth of Christ, so God's song is love over his children, who through his Son believe. This is what John says in the opening chapters of his Gospel, when he declares to us in John Chapter 1 these wonderful words. He says to us ~~that we---~~

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:9-14, ESV

He gives us the power to become children. This was a problem in Jesus's birth and his day, as it is ours.

I close with these thoughts from pastor and writer N.T. Wright, when he writes these words: "That the authorities in Jerusalem, when they get wind that there may be a royal baby around somewhere, they get nervous. The Herods of our day, too, scream bloody murder at any suggestion that God would break out of his religious box and challenge the actual powers of the world, whether the politicians or the media or the high priests of scientific materialism." He says, "I find it strangely comforting that actually people like Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens take the trouble to attack us so viciously. It shows that, like Herod, they are rattled. They know their number is being called, their power base is being challenged. Good. That is how it should be. The things that our old world sneers at, then, they all hang together. Our entire culture simply doesn't want to know about a God who does something new. Christmas as nostalgia? That's fine. It's part of the old world that makes us feel at home. Christmas as shopping bonanza? That's fine, too, because again we have subsumed the message back into the old world of getting and spending. Christmas as family time? Well, that's OK, though it is now routine to sneer at that, too, perhaps because families, warts and all, can actually be a sign of God's grace and new life. But Christmas as the Living God doing a new thing under the nose of Herod, doing a new thing within the womb of Mary, even—shock, horror—doing a new thing

within our own hearts and lives? That is so threatening that it's best—so our culture thinks—to sneer at the very mention.”

One of my colleagues, mentors, and influencers, Dr. Timothy Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, did an interview with New York Times, Nicholas Kristoff, this past week, and it was published. I highly encourage you to read it, but I also encourage you to read the comments to that column. You'll hear the sneering. It's important if you are a believer to hear the sneering. If you're not a believer and you sneer, that's OK, too. It's right and appropriate, because I remember what it was like to sneer.

But in truth—I remember what it was like to sneer, but I now know a joy that has wiped the sneering from my soul. And he can wipe it from yours. He's wiped my arrogance and my pride. He's rattled the cage of my soul. Because he's done something new. He put his Son into a virgin's womb. This text tells us that when we become his children, he puts his Spirit in us. And when he does, the Spirit comes into our hearts and enables us to cry, “I'm justified”? No. He enables us to cry, “Father, dear Father.” So you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. That's a new thing. It's a heart thing. It's a public thing. But it's a Gospel thing. In the fullness of time.

Where are you this morning in the fullness of time? I don't know how long the Lord will wait to return his Son to us. It might be another 1300 years, but it also could be today. Please Lord, let it be. But I encourage you, if you are not a believer, to consider seriously the forgiveness, the freedom, the sonship, and the joy that can be yours to Christ this day. If you are a believer, know this: He's done far more than justify you. He's made you a child. And like children ready to unwrap gifts, let us erupt in joy and cheer, for the Lord has declared that we are co-heirs with Christ as his children.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your Word. We thank you for the beauty of the Gospel. Now Lord, may you enable us to enjoy you and to worship you in Spirit and in truth. May your Spirit stir within us that we might cry out to you, “Abba, Father. Dear Father.” Lover of our souls, we thank you for what you have done through your Son. Lord, we thank you for the redemption that is ours through Christ and the righteousness that is our gift, but far more so, that we might become your children. Lord, I pray for those who do not know you who are here this morning, that this would be their time. And may your Holy Spirit draw them to yourself by your precious and merciful hand, to free them and make them your children. And for those who do know you, Lord, may this be a day that they remember that the Lord is good to all he has made. We give you thanks and praise. In Jesus's name. Amen.