

In the Fullness of Time

Galatians 4:4-6

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But 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. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So, you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. – Galatians 4:4-7, ESV

Advent: Whose coming gets people excited this time of year?

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. We don’t usually make a big deal out of following the traditional liturgical church calendar here, for a variety of reasons, but it is helpful for us to think about what Advent means and why its loss hurts our culture. Oh, sure, you can still find Advent calendars at stores, and my favorites are filled with chocolate. But those start on December 1st, not the last Sunday of November, or four Sundays before Christmas, and they’re usually themed to celebrate a very different coming than the one Christians traditionally anticipate celebrating at Advent.

Advent comes from Latin and means “coming.” We sang my two favorite Advent carols at the beginning of the worship service, which focus our hearts on longing for the coming of Jesus into His world. This is the season of “coming.” So, let me ask you a question: Whose coming gets people most excited this time of year? Whose coming gets the most press in our culture each December? Here’s a hint: “You better not pout. You better not cry, You better not shout, I’m telling you why . . .”

The coming of Santa Claus is an interesting contrast to the coming of Jesus. Santa comes to bring gifts and toys to deserving girls and boys, and if you get good stuff from Santa, you can pat yourself on the back for making the Nice list and not the Naughty list. But Jesus comes to a world cursed and condemned, to people guilty and rebellious, and He comes to give Himself – infinitely more valuable than all the goodies and toys in the world – to those who are definitely on the Naughty list and are utterly undeserving.

The more we understand this, the more truly joyful and thankful we will be this Advent and Christmas. In our series this year, we’re taking a look at Christmas According to the Apostle Paul, focusing on key verses and passages in Paul’s letters that help us better understand what happened on that first Christmas over 2,000 years ago with the greatest coming the world has ever known, the coming of the Son of God into the world. Our

passage today in Galatians 4 reminds us that Christ's **coming** was also the Father's **sending** of His Son into the world.

In the Fullness of Time, v. 4

Verse 4 tells us *“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law.”* *“When the fullness of time had come.”* The times or the chronology had been fulfilled. What does this mean? Well, part of what it surely means is that God had sovereignly ordained the time when Jesus was born as the right time after a long time of promising and waiting. If we look in Scripture to see one place where the time or chronology was fulfilled, we can look to Daniel 9 and the famous prophecy of the Seventy Weeks, found in Daniel 9:24: *“Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place.”* (ESV)

Now, we don't have time to go into great detail about the context of this promise or the exact meaning of it, which is likely a blend of symbolism and chronology. Let's look instead at the exact wording of Daniel 9:24 and ask the clear and obvious question – When did these things actually happen? We have six things prophesied:

1. Finish (make an end of) the transgression
2. Put an end to sin
3. Atonement for iniquity
4. Bring in everlasting righteousness
5. Seal both vision and prophet
6. Anoint a most holy place

If we avoid the trap of overthinking and over speculation, the obvious answer is that Jesus accomplished this work on the cross. He cried out *“It is finished!”* as He made full atonement for our sin. He completed the work of earning a perfect, everlasting righteousness for His people. And He completely fulfilled all of the visions and promises of the prophets, as we saw in 2 Corinthians 1:20: *“For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.”* As far as anointing a most holy place, remember that the curtain separating the most holy place (Holy of Holies) in the Temple was torn in two while Jesus was on the cross.

Hebrews 10:19-25 says we now have access into a better holy place through the body of Jesus:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (ESV)

So, Jesus Himself fulfilled all the things that were appointed for God's people and the Holy City, Jerusalem, to do at the finish of the decreed 70 Weeks. The finishing of the work of God, the fulfillment of the promises of God, on the cross of Calvary outside the city walls of Jerusalem was the whole reason why God sent forth His Son, and He did so just when the time was right, when the time had been fulfilled.

Many circumstantial reasons have been cited as to why Jesus was born "in the fullness of time": So much of the known world was united by the Roman Empire, the largest empire the world had ever seen to that point, and everyone in the Roman Empire read and wrote Greek, thanks to the conquering work of Alexander the Great hundreds of years before. And the Roman roads and the Roman peace, enforced by the Roman Army, also created a never-before-seen system for spreading communication and ideas, so that the Gospel of Jesus Christ could spread from India to Spain and from Rome to Ethiopia within the generation of the Apostles, before the final destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

But I think Paul has biblical prophetic time in view here, and not only does Daniel provide us with the 70 Weeks prophecy but we also have King Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 2 and Daniel's own night visions in Daniel 7, both of which tell the same story. They tell the history of four great human empires, covering hundreds of years of human history in advance before they happened. They both show that the Babylonian Empire would be followed by the Medo-Persian Empire which would be followed by the Greek Empire and then the mighty, terrorizing Roman Empire, during which time the Christ, the Son of Man, would come. In Daniel 2, He is described as a rock not cut out by human hands which grows into a mountain that fills the whole earth. In Daniel 7, He is one like a Son of Man who is splendid in majesty and who is given a kingdom that will never end but will fill the whole earth.

The whole Old Testament shows us that God had planned and prepared to send His Son into the world for hundreds and hundreds of years, and that He ordered all things until the time was right. For us today, this boosts our confidence in Christ as our Savior, knowing that He came according to the Father's perfect plan, in the Father's perfect timing, to be our perfect Savior. It also strengthens our confidence in the rule of God over our lives. If He orders the kingdoms and empires of men, the times and the ages, then surely we can trust Him to care for our lives. And of course this doesn't mean a life free from pain and suffering, just as we see Jesus' perfectly planned coming didn't mean a problem-free life for Him. But all of our times – the joys and the sorrows, the victories and the struggles, the pleasure and the pain – are all in God's good hands, and "in the fullness of time" reminds us of this great truth.

God Sent Forth His Son, v. 4

"*God sent forth His Son*" – Just as Paul is communicating something very specific with "*the fullness of time*," so also the verb he chooses to use for "*sent forth*" communicates a very specific idea. Jesus was came into this world by being "*sent forth*," coming in a way that no mere human being ever is. Did you ever wonder what you were doing before you were conceived in your mother's womb? Well, the answer is nothing. You weren't doing anything before you were conceived because you didn't exist.

You had no preexistence, but Jesus did. "*Sent forth*" is a verb that means to be sent out from a place that is home, that is safe and comfortable, to a foreign place or even a dangerous place. It's only used a handful of times in the New Testament and most often in connection with missionaries or others sent out from churches to other places.

God sent forth His Son. The One God sent was not an angel or any of His creations, but One who was His Son, One who was like Himself. The Son of God is God the Son, sent by the Father to come and save us. This shows us not only how uniquely divine Jesus is, but it also shows us how much God loves us, that He would send forth His own, one and only Son. How very different this is from the heart of God than sending out human prophets or sending forth angels from heaven with messages, as Gabriel was sometimes sent. This is not Gabriel or Michael, but the very Son of God, and He was sent forth not to deliver a message but to deliver up His own life for us all!

Born of Woman, Born Under the Law, v. 4

Paul's use of specific and significant vocabulary continues with the final phrases of verse 4, "born of a woman, born under the Law" – "born" here, used twice, translates a verb that means to be made or to become. The fact that Jesus was "made of a woman" or "became of a woman" indicates that His human nature came entirely from His mother, Mary. In the first Gospel promise God makes in Scripture, in Genesis 3:15, the Promised One is called "the seed of the woman." God cursed the serpent whose tempting lies brought sin into the world:

The Lord God said to the serpent,

*"Because you have done this,
cursed are you above all livestock
and above all beasts of the field;
on your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.*

*I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel."* – vv. 14-15, ESV

"Her offspring" or "her seed," as some translations render it, is a very unusual construction. Technically, the Hebrew word translated "seed" here refers to the male's contribution to the making of children, though it is sometimes used to refer to the child of a man and woman. Only here is it used to refer to a child of only a woman. The Promised One is her offspring, the seed of woman and not of man.

In The Apostle's Creed, we confess that we believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary. The Heidelberg Catechism explains this language from the Apostle's Creed in question # 35

35. Q. What do you confess when you say: "He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary?"

A. The eternal Son of God, who is and remains true and eternal God, took upon himself true human nature from the flesh and blood of the virgin Mary, through the working of the Holy Spirit. Thus, he is also the true seed of David, and like his brothers in every respect, yet without sin.

Jesus was not only born of a woman, but He was also born under the Law. He came under the obligation of not only the Moral Law of the 10 Commandments, but He was also born under the Ceremonial Mosaic Law, which set the pattern for the work He had come to do.

The Ceremonial Mosaic Law was the law of sacrifices, priests, holiness and cleanliness laws all showed the clear need for God's people to be holy and the need for a perfect sacrifice to atone for sin and cleanse God's people. Jesus lived His life in perfect obedience to the Law – both in His moral sinless perfection and in His complete devotion to the call of God on His life to fulfill the ceremonial law as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and as our High Priest who offers up His own life in sacrifice. He was born under the Law to both fulfill the Law and remove the curse of the Law by taking that curse on Himself on the cross.

To Redeem, v. 5

Jesus was sent forth “*to redeem those who were under the law.*” To redeem someone is to buy them back from an imprisoned or enslaved condition. People could become enslaved by being captured in war or by being so deep in debt that they were sold into slavery until they earned enough to pay off their debts. To redeem someone from slavery required a redemption price to be paid to a god or goddess (the priests or priestesses at the Temple) and then that god or goddess would “release” the slave from bondage.

Paul uses this imagery from the ancient world to explain what Jesus did for us on the cross. He paid the debt we owe for our sin, because the wages of sin is death – what we earn from sin is what we owe: death. And Jesus pays that, by offering His life in our place. Because His life is of infinite value as the sinless Son of God, He is able to pay for all of the sin debt of all of God's people for all time and set us free from our bondage to sin and to Satan, who had taken us captive to do his will in his war against God.

Paul explains this in Colossians 2:13-15:

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. (ESV)

And the author Hebrews explains it in Hebrews 2:14-15:

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. (ESV)

That We Might Receive Adoption, v. 5

Once we are redeemed from slavery, God does something even more wonderful: He adopts us as His own children. This is the reason why Jesus redeemed us “so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So, you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.”

This is the astounding grace of the Gospel and the true good news of Christmas that should never cease to fill our souls with holy wonder: That the God of the Universe, majestic and holy, transcendent and self-sufficient, should take treasonous rebels who have spurned His rule and repeatedly broken His law and should send forth His one and only Son to be born in a helpless, vulnerable condition as a baby, to keep and fulfill the Law, to redeem us from slavery and death at the cost of His own life, offered up in love and in unspeakable agony on the cross, all so that God could adopt us as His children and make us His heirs, no longer slaves but sons of God – This is a story so unbelievably and yet eternally and unchangeably true, planned and carried out in love.

I don't care what you're hoping Santa Claus might bring you this Christmas, it doesn't compare to this. This is the GOOD NEWS and the PRICELESS GIFT that makes for the only truly Merry Christmas we can have for all eternity!