

FULLNESS OF TIME

Galatians 4:4-5

We now come to the third week of preparations celebrating Christ's coming.

From Matt. 1: We have seen Him as God with us - Emmanuel

From Isa. 9: We have marveled at His fourfold plentitude of the Son who was a Child, yet with this character:

- Wonderful Counselor
- Mighty God
- Everlasting Father
- Prince of Peace

And now, to further prepare our hearts we go to Paul in Gal. 4:4-5 read). What is vital for us to see this morning is that phrase so clearly stated -- fullness of the time.

God has planned to enter this world and He did. And He did it at His precise moment! What time did God consider "the fullness of time"?

It's astounding how God prepared the world. Remember Dan. 2 and the image:

- | | |
|---------|-----------------------|
| Babylon | head of gold |
| Persia | chest of silver |
| Greece | mid-section of bronze |
| Rome | ? |

Briefly, in that progression, especially Greece to Rome, something happened. When Alexander (the Great) died in 333 B.C., his empire fell to pieces, but his life's goal never stopped! What was his goal? To Hellenize or make Greek culture worldwide. Thus, as Rome extended itself from East to West, sunrise to sunset, it was an empire that spread from the banks of the Nile to the banks of the Tune River of Scotland, from the Straights of Gibraltar to the highlands of Iran. In that world came Christ!

Thus the world that cradled Christ was the world that Christianity entered, and by God's definition was the fullness of time. He was characterized by six things:

1. Worldwide citizenship
2. World language
3. World transportation
4. World peace
5. World moral decline
6. World expectancy

In short order let me demonstrate this:

1. World citizenship/law:
Acts 16:35 Paul far from home in dire straights didn't have home without it.

Look again at Acts 22:22. But citizenship¹ had its price. The empire began to put its emphasis on Emperor worship. It was the religious expression of the unity of the State which was seen in the empire,

¹ Erich Sauer

especially Caligula (A.D. 37-41) and Domitian (81-96). The Emperor ranked as “God and sovereign Saviour of human life” (so already Julius Caesar), “God’s son” (Augustus), “Lord and God” (Domitian), “High Priest,” “Saviour of the World” (Augustus Claudius, Nero), “King of Kings.” His decrees were called “gospels” [good news], his letters ‘sacred writings.’ His arrival was termed a “parousia” (advent), his visit an “epiphany.” Through all this a clash with early Christianity was unavoidable; it was the chief ground of the persecution of Christians; and at the same time the empire of the first century became a type of Antichrist’s empire of the End time (the “beast”, with the “names of blasphemy” on his heads adorned with diadems, Rev. 13”1).

“And yet even this imperial will was subject to the will of the Most High. From the centre of the Mediterranean world there issues a purely political order, affecting nations, the census decree of Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1); but in the last analysis it is only a means in the hand of the Lord of all lords to bring about the fulfilment of an old prophetic word concerning a very small city in the land of Judah, the small city of Bethlehem Ephrathah, the city of David (Mic. 5:2; Luke 2:1-7). Here verily the great and the small touch, and in the small the Greatest of all!”

2. Secondly, World language. Greek became the common language lingua franca- language trade of the world. So the news was quickly understood.

But God’s fullness of time wasn’t just world law and language. It was also world travel/communications.

(I) *World Communications*. In the market place of every city there stood a milestone giving the distance from Rome. In the market of

“Rome the eternal” there stood a golden milestone, erected by Augustus, which described the capital city as the heart of this giant, pulsating organism of peoples. Between Alexandria and Asia Minor there was a daily shipping connection (Ramsay, *Letters to the Seven Churches*, 18, 435). According to Pliny one travelled from Spain to Ostia, the port of Rome, in four days, and in two days from Africa. The tomb inscription is known of a Phrygian mercant who not less than seventy-two times made the journey from Hierapolis, near Colosse in Asia Minor, to Rome, over 1,250 miles.

Without this notable world traffic the swift advance of early Christianity would have been inconceivable. Sea traffic was specially important to them, for early Christian gospel work was in great measure a labour in harbour cities, and especially so with Paul. “In the main the world of the apostle is to be sought where the sea wind blows.” One need only think of Paul’s sojourns in the ports of Caesarea, Troas, Ephesus, Athens, Corinth, and Rome.

Yet the land connections also were of the utmost importance. Even the most remote and isolated lands were opened up through roads and bridges. Already at that time a tolerably complete network of well-built highways, protected by walls and fortresses, spread itself over the whole empire. “All roads lead to Rome.” On these imperial and main roads the messengers of the gospel later travelled, bringing to the world the joyful news of the Redeemer who had appeared. Paul alone journeyed by land and water a total of 15,000 miles. [*Some estimate.*]

4. There was also World Peace.

This was an especial fruit of the rule of the Emperors. Since the Romans were the lords of the whole earth, the passions of the

people became ever more allayed. There set in the much lauded “Roman Peace,” *Pax Romana*. Although the period of Augustus was not entirely free from war, yet never-theless at last the temple of Janus at Rome, the temple of the god of war, after over 200 years of uninterrupted fighting (since 236), could at length be shut, in the year 29 B.C. And for two centuries, until A.D. 180 the world lay in peace.

5. There was Worldwide Decadence or Moral Decline.

But morally this whole civilized world carried within itself the germ of death. The streams of gold which, especially since the victory over Hannibal (202 B.C.), flowed into the world’s capital led to such luxury that filth and vulgarity soon lifted their heads in the most insolent manner. According to the descriptions of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Juvenal, we cannot portray with adequate blackness the low moral state to which aristocracy and highest State officials had sunk. Debauchery and gluttony, subornation and poisoning, vulgarity and immorality, unchastity and licentiousness were the order of the day, especially in the middle of the first century. The lowest classes had sunken equally low. In the large Hellenistic cities, especially of Italy, lack of work ruined the masses. “*Panem et circenses*” -- “Bread and Games” -- this was their demand to the rulers. By day they loitered idly around; in the evening they went to the amphitheatre, the disgusting pleasure resort of Roman brutality. So vast were the crowds that pressed to the wild beast hunts, the gladiatorial contests, and the mimic sea battles, that the Emperors Vespasian and Titus caused to be built in Rome the vast Flavian amphitheatre, which had 54,000 seats, and at the dedication of which, in spectacles lasting 120 days, not less than 12,000 beasts and 10,000 gladiators lost their lives.

It was otherwise with the middle class. Here the papyri witness that there were still much decorum and morality, private family life,

and strong religious feeling. Faith in the gods of Greece and the Italian deities was indeed gone, on which account the mass of the people turned to the oriental deities from the remote East, which, in large numbers, were gaining ground at that time.

* In fact Rom. 1:28-32 may be Paul looking out window. But finally there was one more notable feature of those full times.

6. World Expectancy. Out of Egypt, Persia, Babylon and Asia Minor flowed the rivers of human religions and mystery gods. The “fullness of time” was so religious:

Isis, Osiris	-	Egypt
Mithras	-	Persia
Cybele	-	Asia Minor
Emperor worship	-	Orient

State gods, Greek gods, oriental gods all flowed into one vast river of human religious mixture. To all this was the oriental/Eastern secret religions.

Moreover, most of these Oriental religions had *the common root idea of faith in a Nature god who died and came again to life*, at which they had arrived by deifying the fading and reviving of the vegetable world or the rising and setting of the sun, moon, and stars. And December 25th, three days after death of the high rose the conqueror sun... It was the birthday of Baal in Syria and Mithras in Persia, and so on....

Man had focused on outward power, wealth, architecture, and religion, but found he was inwardly bankrupt.

Thus came the praise of death and the other side -- when the body or person of soul opened to let the “birthday of eternity”.

But if happiness is not to be found on *this side*, then the gaze, quite of itself, is directed with so much the greater longing to the *other side*; and this becomes no longer that gloomy, joyless shadowy world of the past, but the reverse; the life on earth is shadows, and yonder is the real, true existence. Now one continually reads of the body as the “*prison*” of the soul, and death is praised as release, as the “birthday of eternity,” as was said by Seneca, the Stoic philosopher, the tutor of Nero, the brother of Gallio (Acts 18:12).

So there was seen an expectancy. Both Suetonius and Tacitus make mention of a widestread rumour that the Orient would become powerful and that a mighty movement would go forth from the Jews. Writing about A.D. 120, both historians report that it stands in the ancient priestly books that descendants of Jewry would size world authority. (See Tacitus *Hist. V*, 13, and Suetonius, *Vesp. 4*).

Extremely noteworthy is the ring of these presentiments in the fourth Shepherd song of the Roman poet Virgil, in the century before Christ. There the poet sings of a child who will bring back the Golden Age. The child descends from heaven. Then peace rules on the earth. The land dispenses its gifts without toil. The oxen no more fear the lion. [For example, the horrible baptism of blood in the “*Taurobolium*” of the Mysteries of Cybele in Asia Minor. The initiate stood in a pit which was covered over with boards. Above the boards a bull was slaughtered, the blood of which streamed downwards through the crevices of the boards on the person standing beneath.

Thus the world law and language combine with communication/peace and out of blackest moral decline is a strange expectancy that as the night is conquered by the light, so...can we?

Until at last, coming from the East, from the rising of the sun, from the mouth of simple witnesses, becoming ever stronger and stronger, there rings the world-conquering proclamation:

CHRIST --
THE ATONER FOR MANKIND,
THE SAVIOUR OF ALL SINNERS,
THE ONE CONSCIOUSLY EXPECTED BY ISRAEL,
THE ONE UNCONSCIOUSLY DESIRED BY THE
PEOPLES
OF THE WORLD;

CHRIST HAS APPEARED!

Thus the whole pre-Christian history of salvation is a guiding of mankind to the Redeemer of the world. The people of Israel were prepared in advance by historical revelation; the peoples of the world by the happenings of politics and civilization.

The Old Testament is promise and expectation, the New is fulfilment and completion. The Old is the marshalling of the hosts to the battle of God, the New is the Triumph of the Crucified One. The Old is the twilight and dawn of morning, the New is the rising sun and the height of eternal day.

What was the fullness of time?

God orchestrating through:

worldwide citizenship
communication
travel
peace
decadence
expectancy