

# In the Fulness of the Time

A Sermon on Galatians 4:4-5

Preached by Paul Liberati, November 29, 2020

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*But when the fulness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law – Gal. 4:4-5a*

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This morning we begin our celebration of the Advent season where we, as the people of God, begin to prepare for the greater celebration of the Birth of Jesus Christ. As we do so, our Scripture passage is from Galatians chapter 4, where the apostle Paul reminds us of just how significant the coming of Jesus really was.

As we unpack this portion of God's Word, I think it might be helpful to consider this passage in three basic points: (1) the *timing*, (2) the *manner*, and (3) the *purpose* of the coming of Jesus Christ. In these three points, we find a wonderful summary of the entire Christmas message, and so we'll look at each of these points, briefly in turn.

## 1. The Timing of the Coming of Christ

Well first of all, we begin with the question of *timing*. When was it that Jesus Christ came into the world? The answer to that question is found in verse 4, where the apostle Paul says that Jesus came, "*when the fullness of the time had come.*"

Now, when we hear that phrase, "the fulness of the time", those of us who are lovers of history tend to think in terms of the progress and development of the historical context. That is, all the different ways the world was made ready for the coming of the Messiah.

For example, we know that at that time the Greek language was known and spoken throughout the various nations of the Roman Empire. Also by that time Jewish synagogues were set up and strategically located in many of the major cities across the land. And not only that, but it was also by that time that the Roman transportation system – including the

roads and travel routes by sea – were very well-established. And so from that perspective we often say that a common language, strategic locations for Jewish synagogues, and the ability to travel from place to place were all things that contributed to the preparation of this world for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. And of course, to a great extent, that was true; these were the very things that made it possible for the Gospel message to travel so rapidly and so effectively in the ancient world.

But you know, when we look at the context of our passage, you realize that's not really where the apostle Paul is directing our attention. If we look at the previous context of our passage we can see that, in Paul's mind, the fulness of the time corresponds, not to the circumstantial preparations of the world (although that's important) but more so to the spiritual preparations of the Church.

I say that because, in verses 1-3, Paul is developing a theological point about the growth and the maturity of the people of God down through the ages. And he illustrates that point by the example of a young child who has to wait for the *time* when he can finally receive the inheritance that was promised to him by his father. In Paul's illustration, that child personifies the people of God, who also, during the entire period of the Old Testament were growing, and developing, and eagerly waiting for the *time*, when they would finally receive the inheritance that was promised to them by God. And so Paul tells us, that just like the child, the Church itself had been waiting for the "fulness of the time," and he describes that time, in verse 2, as *the time appointed by the Father*.

So, when did Jesus come into this world? The answer is very simple; he came exactly when the believing people of God were ready to receive their king. And even though the people couldn't go home and mark that day on their calendars, with any degree of certainty, we do know that they rejoiced with joy unspeakable, when that day finally came. When you think about it like that, you begin to appreciate just how precious the coming of Jesus really was for those who were there to see it. Because, think about it: for almost 1500 years the people of God had been waiting and laboring under the burden of their sins. Paul says in verse 3 that they were tied up and "bound" to the system of the ceremonial law, which, instead of putting away their sins once and for all, only reminded them day by day and year by year of their continual need for real cleansing. And so really, that system, just like the *guardians* and *stewards* that Paul mentions in verse 2, with all of its teaching and discipline, with all of its correction and restraint – that whole system was designed by God to produce

a longing and a yearning in the hearts and minds of His people. And that's exactly what we find at the coming of Christ. The people of God were longing for the Savior that God promised them would come.

In Luke chapter 2, we see that a man named Simeon, as well as a widow named Anna, are both described as those who were *waiting for the consolation of Israel and the redemption of Jerusalem*. But, it wasn't just them. In Mark 15, we see that even Joseph of Arimathaea is also described as a man who was *waiting for the kingdom of God*. And so you can see here that it's not so much that God was preparing the world (although he was) but more importantly, He was preparing the hearts of His covenant people.

Every year, during the Christmas season, we sing a lot of different songs, in church on Sundays and all through the week at home. And one of the songs that my children like to sing is, *Come Thou Long Expected Jesus*. As you think about the lyrics to that song, you realize that they provide us with a perfect commentary on our text. They say,

Come, thou long expected Jesus,  
Born to set thy people free,  
From our fears and sins release us,  
Let us find our rest in thee.

You see Christmas, according to Paul, is the long-expected fulfillment of the promise of God. And because of that, it teaches us a very practical lesson—namely, that God is always faithful to His Word. When He gives a promise and when He appoints a day, we can know with absolute certainty, that He will always keep that promise, and that day is sure to come. And when it does come, we can also know that it came exactly at the appointed time. That's what Paul tells us. He says that Jesus came into this world *when the fulness of the time had come*.

## **2. The Manner of the Coming of Christ**

The second thing that he mentions is the *manner* of his coming. So, the question here is, How was it that Jesus Christ came into this world. At the end of verse 4, Paul answers that question, and you'll notice that he gives it to us in two parts. First he says that

He was *born of a woman*, and then he says that he was *born under the law*. And really, both of these phrases are amazing statements, and both of them are fundamental to the Christmas message.

To appreciate what Paul is saying here, we need to consider the fact that he just identified Jesus as the Son of God. He said, But when the fulness of the time had come, *God sent forth His Son*—born of a woman, born under the law. And, that's important because when he does that, he first of all confirms the deity of Jesus Christ. According to verse 4, it wasn't the sending that made him the Son of God. No, he was the Son of God before he was sent into the world, which is why the apostle John could say, in 1 John chapter 4, In this was manifested the love of God, that *God sent his only begotten Son into the world*.

When we consider the fact that Jesus is the natural and eternal Son of God, it makes the manner of his coming all the more amazing. It makes it amazing that Paul would go on to say that he was *born of a woman*.

Now, when we consider that phrase, born of a woman, we might be tempted to think that it's a direct reference to the Virgin Birth. That's especially true when we read this passage at Christmas time, because the Virgin Birth is such an important part of the Christmas story. After all, Isaiah 7:14 says very clearly that the sign of his coming would be that a virgin would *conceive and bear a son*. And so, there's no question that Jesus was *conceived by the Holy Ghost and Born of the Virgin Mary*.

But here, I'm not so sure that's what Paul has in mind. Instead, I think what he wants us to see is the union that Jesus has with his people. In fact, if you study this particular phrase "born of a woman" you realize that in Jewish culture it was a very common way of speaking about one's basic humanity.

For example, in Job chapter 14 the Bible says, *Man that is born of a woman is but for a few days, and full of trouble*. Likewise, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says that *among them that are born of a woman there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist*. And so you can see that this phrase was a simple way to speak about our common human nature. And why is that important? It's because what Paul wants us to see is not how God distinguished His Son *from us* (by his divine conception), but how God identified His Son *with us* (by his human birth).

You see, Paul wants us to see that Jesus is *flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone* so that we might understand the significance of the prophecy that *his name shall be called*

*Emmanuel*—that is, God with us.

When you think about it like that, you realize what an amazing truth this is. That the Son of God, who always was and continues to be in true and perfect union with his Father, is now, by virtue of the incarnation, in true and perfect union with you and with me. This is an amazing truth. And, of course, it reminds us that this is what Christmas is all about: It's about how God kept His Word and fulfilled the promise that He made way back in Genesis 3:15. Where He said that our savior would be the "Seed of the Woman" who would come and crush the Serpent's head. And so Paul wants us to make all those connections. To that end, he decides to use a very particular phrase, and he says that Jesus was "*born of a woman.*"

But, if you notice, that's only part of what Paul says. He also says that Jesus was born *under the law*. Now, I think what he's doing here is taking us from the general to the specific. Paul wants us to see that the Son of God came into this world, not just to live with us, but even more wonderful: so that he might live *for* us. You see, it's one thing to say that Jesus lived his entire life in the presence of his people. But it's quite another thing to say that he lived that life in the *place* of his people. The Christmas story, then, gets better by the minute.

Jesus didn't just come to be a man, but he came to be the head and representative of his covenant people. What that means is that Jesus came to live a life of perfect obedience, keeping every commandment of His Father, without a single exception. That's what Paul means when he says, that Jesus was made *under the law*: that he willingly and voluntarily took upon himself the obligations of the Covenant. And, just so we appreciate what that means, I think we need to keep in mind just how difficult it was to live an entire life under the rule of the Mosaic law. After all, even the apostle Peter described the law in that way. He said it was like a heavy yoke on the necks of God's people. In Acts 15:10 he said to the Judaizers: *Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?*

And so, there's no question that God was gracious in the giving of His law, but there's also no question that living under that system was a very difficult thing to do. And it reminds us of what a tremendous sacrifice it was for the Son of God to come into this world as one who was *under the law*.

I mentioned earlier that one of the hymns we sing is *Come thou Long expected Jesus*. And we certainly enjoy that son. But this morning, we also sang one of the All-time favorite hymns of our family, *O Come O Come Emmanuel*. Again, in that song, there's a very

important line that appears in the second verse, and it speaks to this very point. It says:

O Come O Come, thou Lord of might  
Who to thy tribes on Sianai's height  
In ancient times didst give the law  
In cloud and majesty and awe.

This verse reminds us that, when Moses received the law of God on Mount Sinai, he received it from the hand of Jesus Christ. It was the very finger of the Son of God that wrote the ten commandments on those two tables of stone. And we know that, because in John 8, Jesus identified himself as the One who spoke to Moses from the midst of the burning bush when he said, *Before Abraham was, I Am*.

And so here, what Paul is telling us in this text is that the very One who delivered his law to men also came down from heaven, became a man, and placed himself under the yoke of his own law! And Congregation, who would have ever imagined that to be the case? That the Son of God would humble himself to such a degree? And yet Paul says, that is precisely what took place in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

And, it's right here that there's one thing that we absolutely have to remember. And that is that, even though God sent forth His Son to be born of a woman and to be born under the law, He didn't do that for the benefit of His Son. No, He did that for your benefit, and He did it for mine. In fact, that leads us to our final point, because that's what Paul goes on to tell us in the rest of this text.

### **3. The Purpose of the Coming of Christ**

And so having already considered the *timing* and the *manner*, he moves on to explain the *purpose* for the coming of Jesus Christ: Why was it that God sent forth His Son into this world? Well, in verse 5 Paul answers that question and, again, he presents that answer in two layers. First, he says that God's immediate purpose for the birth of Jesus Christ was to accomplish the redemption of his people. He says, God sent forth His Son *in order that He might redeem them that were under the law*.

What this teaches us is that when Jesus assumed the obligations of the Covenant that

included far more than his own personal, positive, keeping of the law. It also required that he make a full and complete satisfaction for the sins of his people. In other words, Jesus didn't just come to *live* for us, but he came to *die* for us as well. Jesus came to redeem us out from under the law. And, this whole idea of us being *under the law* was already explained back in chapter 3, where Paul said that it's not just the law that we were under but, because of our sins, we were under the curse and condemnation of the law. He said, *Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.*"

And so when Jesus came into this world to be our representative, and he was placed under the law, we need to remember that he placed himself under a law that was already broken. By his union with us, Jesus took upon himself the curse that was upon us, and he did that, so that he might redeem us from that very curse. And, Congregation, if you're wondering just how he might have done that, the answer is that Jesus became a curse for us. Listen to the way Paul puts it in Galatians 3:13. He says: *Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.")*

Here we have a great picture of the substitutionary nature of the death of Jesus Christ. And you'll notice that Paul keeps using this word, *redeemed*. That word is very powerful, because it means that by his life, obedience and especially his death on the cross, Jesus *purchased* our salvation. The Bible says that his blood was the ransom price that he *paid* to satisfy the wrath of God against our sin.

In 1 Peter chapter 1, that's what Peter says: He says, *you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver and gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you.*"

You see when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Bible shows us that we cannot separate his birth from his death. The Christmas message is nothing less than the message of our full and complete salvation through the birth, the life, the death, and yes even the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God. In effect, Paul says, Don't forget that God's immediate purpose in sending His Son, was to *redeem you from your sin*.

And you know what? If that was all that God did for us, I would be perfectly satisfied.

And wouldn't you be satisfied if the Christmas message was nothing more than that God loves you, and for the sake of His Son, He forgives you for all of your sins? Wouldn't it be enough to know that we have a right standing before God in terms of a legal justification? Wouldn't that be enough? Of course it would. Because we know that even that much is an act of God's free and sovereign grace, and none of us are worthy of such an amazing gift.

But the truth is, Congregation, that in Jesus Christ, God has done even more for us than that. Paul tells us at the end of verse 5 that God's *ultimate* purpose for sending His Son, was *in order that we might receive*, not just the forgiveness of our sins, but also *the adoption of Sons*. God loved us so much that He sacrificed His only begotten Son because ultimately He wanted you and He wanted me, to be a part of His family. God's desire is to spend eternity in the presence of His redeemed people, and to fellowship with them, not as a master spends time with his servants, but as a Father spends time with His children.

What an amazing message! What an amazing God we have. I could hardly think of a better way to express the joy than to say with the apostle John, *Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God"*

And Congregation, as we go our way this morning, I would only encourage you, that as you enter upon this Advent season, and reflect upon the wonder of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, that you keep the details of this message on your mind. Because it's only when we keep our hearts and minds fixed upon the fulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in the *timing*, the *manner*, and the *purpose* of his coming, that we can experience the joy of the Christmas season. Amen.