

In the Fullness of Time

Galatians 4:4

*"But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons."
(Galatians 4:4)*

Introduction: Fantasy or Faith?

Have you noticed how often you have to make a choice between fantasy and faith these days? We all love a good story, right? But if it's a fictional drama, mystery, comedy, or adventure, then it's important to remember that we have agreed to pretend. That's an agreement we make; it's the very nature of fiction. The audience or reader agrees to play "pretend," if the author or director promises not to bore them. Start boring people, and they will stop "playing pretend." When that happens reality comes crashing into the unreality of fantasy. But as you know, today we are dominated by what has been called "the unreality industry." Many people have difficulty distinguishing between fantasy and reality. If you want to see this for yourself, just keep an eye on social media. During the next natural or manmade disaster, watch to see how many people say, "That reminds me of a movie!" Or you can see it from the other direction. When was the last time you saw a depiction of life-threatening disaster where the characters joined hands and cried out to God for His mercies? That's pretty rare. So, by and large, people's view of reality is framed by fiction or fantasy, not faith. It's different with non-fiction, where authors, directors, readers and viewers aren't supposed to be pretending. But the fantasies of the "unreality industry" have transformed the news into views, and threaten to revise history. As we come to the Scriptures today in faith, some would accuse us of fantasizing. So in today's text, we are forced to make a choice between fantasy and faith. Do we trust the many fantasies of "once upon a time" or God's wisdom "in the fullness of time?" And what exactly does the phrase, "Fullness of Time" really mean?

The Former Times

God's Revelation in the Book of Galatians

In his letter to the church at Galatia, Paul gave the historical background leading up to what he described as "the fullness of time."

- ❖ Paul appealed to the people to be like Abraham who placed faith in God alone, and God placed His righteousness on Abraham's account. 3:6
- ❖ This remarkable promise of righteous standing before God was not unique to Abraham, but was God's universal blessing through Abraham: "in thee shall all the nations of the earth be blessed!" 3:7-9
- ❖ Those who will not receive God's blessing of righteousness through Christ are under a burden of oppression: Under the curse 3:10, Under sin, 3:22, Under the Law, 3:23, Under a schoolmaster (treated as no better than a slave), 3:25, Under tutors and governors, 4:2, Under the burdensome principles of this world, 4:3. When we use the English idiom "under a cloud," we mean that someone is under suspicion. It's one thing for others to suspect you. But what if your own conscience places you "under a cloud?" According to Romans 2:15-16, the sinner's conscience has him under a cloud of suspicion. He knows the truth of God is no fantasy, but is a reality (Romans 1:19-21). How will he escape from under these things?

In this section of Galatians, Paul's point is that the unblemished Good News of the Gospel is God's great blessing for the nations. Salvation is by God's grace alone, by faith alone in Christ alone. In Peter's sermon, he portrayed this Gospel blessing to his fellow Israelites: "Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed. Unto you first God, having raised up His Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from *his* iniquities." (Acts 3:25-26) Proverbs 28:13 reminds us, "He that covers his sins shall not prosper: But whoso confesses and forsakes *them* shall have mercy." Have you known the joy of escaping from the burdensome oppression under the curse, under sin, under the Law, under the governing schoolmaster and the principles of this world? If you cover your sins by denying your sinfulness, you will not succeed. But today if you would forsake your sin, you will have the mercy that came to us through the finished work of Jesus Christ. Only by His death, burial and resurrection do we have God's mercies upon us today. In the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son!

God's Providence as Explained in Scripture

In our recent series on the Book of Daniel, we have learned how the Most High God rules the kingdom of men, appointing whoever He will, even the lowliest of men. Consider the ways that God prepared His people and the entire world for "the fullness of time" when He would send forth His Son. We could think of this as God's prepared conditions for Christ's Great Commission.

➤ **Exile: God's Glory on display in Babylon and Media-Persia**

The God who gives "beauty for ashes" (Isaiah 61:3) magnified His glory, even though His people rebelled. Taken to Babylon with the "up and coming" leaders of other nations, Daniel and his three friends glorified God. With "the fullness of time" in mind, God caused Daniel to write most of chapters 2 through 7 in Aramaic – the international language of the day. What a testimony to the nations! God revealed His glory in the common man's language! Not only did God deliver His people, He also revealed mysteries so that people could see His sovereign control over all things. Just imagine these people returning to their own homelands (under Cyrus) still thinking about how they had seen God's glorious work.¹

➤ **Idolatry: Exasperation with Man's Spiritual Condition**

Idolatry and paganism had left the nations empty and frustrated. The Jewish Law was instructive, but caused the Jewish people to realize that they fell short of the glory of God; their idolatry had cost them dearly. (Paul explains the burdens of this exasperation in Romans 1-3, and with his own testimony in Romans 7:7-14).

➤ **The Dispersion: Longing for the Messiah**

Through their rebellion, the Jewish people had been spread far and wide among the nations. But in each place where they could meet as a group, they formed synagogues. And in those synagogues, they studied the Old Testament Scriptures with all their promises about the promised Messiah. Their hope about the coming Promised One caused the cultures around them to take note. So there was a spirit of expectancy or at least curiosity about the coming Messiah. How would God fulfill His prophecies about the Promised Lord in the Promised Land?

➤ **The Culture: The Greek Language**

Due to Alexander the Great's conquests (prophesied in Daniel 7:6, 17; 8:5-8, 15-22), Greek language and culture was spread throughout the known world. What a marvelous preparation for the Great

¹ Perhaps this is how the wise men of Matthew 2 learned to look for the coming King of the Jews.

Commission. The Lord would cause the New Testament to be written in koine Greek – the common man’s language of the day.

➤ **Brutality: The “Roman Peace” (*Pax Romana*)**

The fourth beast/kingdom of Daniel 7:7 was monstrous. The brutality of Rome kept the peace, even though people were simmering with hatred for this violence. No one wanted to incur the wrath of Rome (Acts 19:40). It was understood that Rome would “keep the peace” by violent massacres if necessary. But even the Roman peace caused people to long for the promised Prince of Peace.

➤ **International Travel: the Roman Roads**

As Greek rule began to fade, Rome became the dominant world power. Their carefully constructed highways were second to none. Conquering the nations under one empire made it possible for missionaries to travel the known world on these roads.

The Fullness of Time

God’s Revelation and God’s Providence help us to embrace Galatians 4:4 with joy: *“But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.”* (Galatians 4:4)
This is the joy of Christmas!

In the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son. The various interpretations of this phrase “fullness of time,” were summarized by one author: “The phrase marks the completion of the old era and the dawn of the new [NCBC]. The noun ‘fullness’ indicates that God has been working his purposes out through history, and it was only when the right time came that he sent his Son [Mor]. It probably means the end of the reign of the Law and the beginning of a new era when the decisive aspect is not what man does or attempts to do, but what God does on behalf of man. The emphasis is on a time designated by God when he assured man’s deliverance from helplessness and subservience to the Law and also to those forces that are opposed to God [TH]. God alone judged and determined when the right time was for the Son of God to be revealed to the world [NAC, NIC]. Christ arrived at the time previously determined by the Father [NTC, SSA]. The Gospel was withheld by God until the world had arrived at a mature age in which the law had completed its educational purpose and it was superseded by the Messiah’s coming [Lt].”²

It’s been said that no one ever learns anything until they have “the need to know.” Think about the way that God has magnified His unique excellence in the fullness of time. In all these things, He has demonstrated that the Most High God rules in the kingdoms of men and appoints over them whoever He chooses – even the lowliest of men (Daniel 4:17, 25, 32; 5:21).

But then step back to consider how God has revealed His glory, even in (or especially in) man’s depravity. These are God’s responses to all the replies of sinful men.

- Someone might say, “Well, what if God would just create perfect human beings and strongly warn them not to sin with the threat of a curse?” God did so, in the Garden of Eden.
- “Well, when they did sin, what if He promised them a way to escape?” He did: Genesis 3:15

² Robert Stutzman, *An Exegetical Summary of Galatians*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 141–142.

- “What if God would frustrate man’s wicked ways and show them the dire consequences?” God’s appeal to Cain about his murderous ways, and the ever present statement “and he died” (Genesis 5) confirmed the warning.
- “What if God would wipe out the wicked people and start all over again with righteous people?” God destroyed the earth with a flood, and delivered Noah. And when the people of the world tried to gather together at the Tower of Babel, God gave them different languages.
- “Well what if God would confirm His promise and promise to bless all the nations of the earth?” God did this through Abraham.
- “What if God were to demonstrate His character and ways through a special chosen people so that the whole world could see His glory?” God chose Israel for that purpose.
- “But what if God could be very exact – giving people very precise laws which would perfectly correspond to his nature – and even put the law right into their consciences?” God gave the 10 Commandments and put these into man’s conscience (Romans 2:15).
- “Alright, what if God could send the perfect priests and prophets and kings to show the earth His ways?” Beginning with Moses, and including notable men such as Samuel, God confirmed His promises – even promising King David that the Promise One would be his descendant! But the prophets, priests and kings demonstrated that they were mere men, and sinful men at that. But God was still faithful.
- “Here’s an idea: What if God Himself would come down to earth and become a human being to give us a pattern of exactly how to obey God?” God sent forth His Son, and sinful people like us crucified Him. But the faithful God raised Him from the dead, and gave us eyewitnesses to that remarkable event.
- “What if God would put His Holy Spirit into the hearts of His people to show the world His glory?” That is what God is doing in this church age.
- “Would it work if God would threaten the world with coming judgment, and give them specific warnings about horrible consequences of mankind’s rebellion? These are the very kinds of warnings that we have about the coming Tribulation period.
- “Ok, ok, what if God Himself would come down and rule this old wicked world with a rod of iron, and even show people His power to raise people from the dead in new, sinless glorified bodies?” This is exactly what God describes in the coming millennium.
- “But what if He would imprison the devil so that he could no longer lead people into wickedness?” God will do this in the Millennium, but when Satan is released for a little season, men will rebel again.
- “Well what if God would begin again with a New Heaven and a New Earth?” He will do so, just as He has said. Will you allow Him to make you a new creation in Christ to get ready?

But in all these things, God has helped mankind to see its depravity. Life’s most wonderful conclusion is this: JESUS IS THE ONLY HOPE!

And God sent forth His Son! And this is no fantasy! Embrace Him today by faith!

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