



# The Story Of Salvation

## NCTM Tuesday Night Studies 2010

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### 19. When The Time Had Fully Come

<sup>4</sup> But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, <sup>5</sup> to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. (Galatians 4:4-5)

Actually, everything that God does is “in the fullness of time.” That is, when God brings a thing to pass, it (i) is at the end of a long process of His preparation and patience; and (ii) serves to bring about His purposes just as He intended them to be. Throughout Scripture this truth is attested. Ecclesiastes 3:1-14 speaks of these things:

**There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven:** a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain, a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.

What does the worker gain from his toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on men. **He has made everything beautiful in its time.** He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God. **I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will revere him.** (Ecclesiastes 3:1-14)

When the writer says that God “has made very thing beautiful in its time”, he means that all things have their place in the purpose and timing of God, even those events that we may think as most ugly or terribly sad. Nothing takes place out of its proper time. David recognised the same when he prayed, “My times are in your hands” (Psa. 31:15) and why he encouraged us to “Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge” (Psa. 62:15).

In Galatians 4:4 Paul is saying that the appearance of Jesus Christ on earth was “when the time had fully come.” Throughout the story of salvation, the covenant Lord of Israel had been preparing for this great day. In what way can we say that the “time had fully come”?

Some apologists have shown that there were some very helpful convergences and developments in history that contributed to the spread of the Gospel immediately after Jesus’ earthly ministry. For example, Geoff Bingham notes the following aspects<sup>1</sup>:

...the one-ness of the world under Rome, the universality of the Greek language, the excellence of communications, especially with Roman roads, and the cultural openness...

As we have seen throughout these studies, God has not actually normally chosen favourable circumstances for the furthering of His purposes, and in fact has at times deliberately sought to work in the impossible situations, at those times when it looks as

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *Salvation History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2008, NCPI: Blackwood, p. 62

if this is entirely the wrong time to expect God's work to go further. What matters isn't *circumstantial possibility*, but rather *prophetic ripeness*. In an age where *potential* is measured, calculated, and assessed, we find the gospel runs counter to our culture. God does not look for potential; rather He works miraculously by His word to create where no potential existed.

In the Old Testament prophecies there were some "time-frame" indicators of when the fullness of times would be reached. For example, Jeremiah prophesied to the people of Judah about the coming judgment of invasion by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, in chapter 25 of his scroll. A clear time frame was given—that this would be for a seventy-year period of servitude (Jer. 25:11) before Babylon's prominence would come to an end. Likewise Daniel prophesied that the desolation of Jerusalem would be for 70 years (Dan. 9:2). Later in the same chapter, he saw further ahead than these events, and the Lord's word came to him through the angel Gabriel:

<sup>24</sup> Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy. <sup>25</sup> Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens', and sixty-two 'sevens'. (Dan. 9:24-25)

The seventy 'sevens' seems to refer to a period of 490 years. It would be at that time that the Lord would act to bring an end to the reign of sin and to establish righteousness, to bring about all that the prophetic line had been looking towards, and to present the anointed Holy One, the Messiah. This will involve the Anointed One being cut off and having nothing (Dan. 9:26). How Israel at Daniel's time understood all these things is a matter for some discussion, but we know that through the whole prophetic line, the Holy Spirit was at work, indicating the coming sufferings and glory of Jesus Christ:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things. (1 Peter 1:10-12)

### **The Coming of the Herald**

In the days and months leading up to the birth of Jesus the Messiah, again we see that fullness of time comes against human expectation, and involves those who seem to have no potential for the action of God in saving the world. As we have seen in the previous studies, Israel's significance as a nation was severely diminished in the political, economic and social landscape. But, according to prophetic word, its climax in significance for the history of the world, was about to break. "Israel was the cradle of the Seed which was to redeem Israel, and be a light to the Gentiles."<sup>2</sup>

Luke tells us about the coming of John the Baptist who was the forerunner to, and announcer of, the coming Christ. In among all the people living in Rome-dominated Jerusalem, an elderly couple are highlighted: Zechariah, a member of the priestly line and his wife Elizabeth. They are notable for their integrity before the Lord, carefully observing His law. They are also notable for they have the sadness of barrenness, Elizabeth being unable to bear children, and now are at the age where there is no longer

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

any expectation or hope. As has been His consistent way through the salvation story, God chooses this couple to be the ones to bear the child who will announce the arrival of the fullness of times. This is how the angel described these things to Zechariah:

Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. (Luke 1:13-17)

When John, the son, was born, Zechariah was filled with the Spirit of the Lord and prophesied over him:

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace. (Luke 1:68-79)

The first part of the prophecy related to the coming not of John, but of the Messiah and His ministry. He will be the fulfilment of the Davidic kingly line and would bring salvation from the enemies of God's people. This was the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham. It would result in a people who were fit to serve the Lord joyfully in holiness and righteousness.

The second part of the prophecy related to the ministry of John himself. John had the great task of announcing to Israel the arrival of the Messiah, who would effect the rescue of God's people *through the forgiveness of sins*. This salvation was not merely a political or military action—in fact it was a priestly and sacrificial one.

### **The Ministry of John the Baptiser**

To those faithful in Israel—and there were such, even though perhaps they were not a majority—the anticipation of the fulfilment of the prophetic line of promise must have been very great. To hear a man announce that the kingdom of God was near, right at hand, must have been like a dream (cf. Psalm 126). These things were anticipated in that prophetic line, and John announced each of them:

1. The kingdom of God, i.e. God's decisive rule in opposing all that is evil and establishing all that is true. So John called out, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven<sup>3</sup> is near." (Matt. 3:2)
2. The coming of Messiah. Messiah would be the prince, anointed of God who would establish this universal kingdom. So John announced the coming of the Lord (Matt. 3:3), and said, "...[O]ne more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie" (Luke 3:16).

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew uses the phrase "kingdom of heaven" rather than "kingdom of God". This reflects his interest in communicating the gospel to people from Israel. In Israel at this time, to speak too directly and too often of "God" was offensive, and so "heaven" was a way of referring to God without being direct.

3. The salvation of all mankind. The universal scope of the kingdom and the Messiah was spelled out; this was not simply an action local to Israel. So John quoted the prophet Isaiah (40:5), "...And all mankind will see God's salvation." (Luke 3:6)
4. This coming of Messiah required that the people prepare themselves through confession of sins, repentance and baptism (Matt. 3:3, 5-6, 8, 11; Luke 3:4, 7-14).
5. Messiah was coming for the remission of sins (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:2), in a way that transcended all of the sacrificial system. So John could point to Christ as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29).
6. With the gift of forgiveness would be the universal outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the whole people of God. (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:32-34)
7. Messiah, through his ministry, would inaugurate the final judgment, i.e. the great goal of salvation history (Matt. 3:7, 12; Luke 3:17).

No wonder, then, that John's preaching caused such a stir and that the whole people of Israel went out to him in the desert to be baptised. All of the promises of God in the long history of salvation right here and right now were coming to fulfilment.

### **Discussion questions**

1. What are some of the practical implications of knowing that everything that God is in the fullness of time?
2. Hank Schoemaker called John the Baptist "the last of the Old Testament prophets." What do you think he meant by that? How does that tie in with Jesus' words about John in Matthew 11:7-15 and Luke 7:24-28? Does our proclamation of the Gospel differ from the proclamation of John the Baptist, and, if so, in what ways?

What other questions or thoughts do you have to talk about?

Take some time to pray with one another.