

GALATIANS 4:4-7

THE FULLNESS OF TIME

“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.”¹

I suppose conscientious preachers look forward to Christmas sermons. The season provides opportunity to instruct people in one of the great doctrines of the Faith. At the heart of the Christmas observance is the doctrine of the Incarnation—God became man. Thoughtless individuals imagine that they may discount this doctrine by saying that the account is found only in the Synoptic Gospels. However, such assertions reveal an abysmal ignorance of the Word.

The Letter to the Galatians is predicated upon the truth that God became man. Woven throughout the warp and the woof of the Apostle’s Letter is this essential truth. Nowhere is the doctrine of the Incarnation more prominently displayed than when Paul draws a contrast between the present freedom of the children of God and the present enslavement of those who are in bondage within the world. Clearly, the Apostle understood that without this birth, without the Son of God becoming man, there can be no freedom—no salvation, no life, no hope. However, our Lord *did* leave His throne and become man that we may have life. I invite you to join me in exploration of this marvellous truth as revealed in the words of the Apostle.

THE SON OF GOD WAS BORN AT A DEFINITE TIME — “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son...” These are indeed glorious words which show that the entry point of the Christian message is at the same time the turning point of history. Even our dates confess this truth. It is now **2007 AD—anno domini ... THE YEAR OF OUR LORD**. Apart from the words which are penned here, life offers no future ... no hope. We are left without hope and without God in the world if this is not **2007 THE YEAR OF OUR LORD**. But God has intervened in a way which brings effective and complete salvation—hope to the hopeless and help to the helpless. That is the Christmas message.

What do you suppose Paul meant when he used the term, “the fullness of time?” The thought conveyed in the original language, precisely captured by our translation, speaks of fulfillment, especially as related to time. Even a casual acquaintance with the ancient world reveals something of the significance of word. Christ was born during the era identified as **Pax Romana**. The rule of one government insured worldwide peace imposed by conquering armies. This peace extended over most of the civilised earth making travel and commerce possible in a way previously unrealised. Great roads linked the empire of the Caesar’s, ensuring free and uninterrupted communications with the furthest outposts of civilisation and providing rapid access to all corners of the empire.

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An even greater factor unifying the diverse regions of the empire was the all-pervasive language and culture of the Greeks. Greek was the *lingua franca* of the empire, being readily understood and read throughout the whole Mediterranean world. Not only linguistically, but also culturally, the ancient world was dominated by the prior educational conquests of the Greeks. Therefore, politically, culturally and linguistically, the world was unified—conditions which ensured a rapid spread of the Good News concerning the salvation purchased through the death and resurrection of our Lord.

Religiously, that ancient world was sunk in a moral abyss so deep that even pagans cried out against it. Spiritual hunger was everywhere evident as witnessed by the prevalent appeal within every social stratum for spiritual insight from religions introduced from the east. The religions in apparent ascendancy within the empire were exactly those ancient religions which had once been confronted by the prophets of God when the Hebrew peoples first entered the Promised Land. The philosophers made a contribution in a negative sort of way, casting doubt on the old pagan systems of religion as they looked for some sort of unifying power behind all the polytheistic systems which had previously prevailed. The Jews themselves had made preparation for the coming of the Christ through the preaching of monotheism in multiplied synagogues situated throughout the empire, and by their anticipation of a Messiah who would right the world's wrongs. That human longing for communion with God, that spiritual restlessness which pervaded all mankind insured a receptive audience once Christ was come. These religious longings insured that, "the fullness of time had come."

Theologically, several significant factors apply in our study of that phrase, "the fullness of time had come." Just as a father in that ancient culture would determine the time his child became a son, so that heavenly Father chose the time when the world was to pass from its childhood under legal supervision to a period of spiritual sonship. In other words, God chose the time of transition from one dispensation to the next.

Events surrounding the earthly ministry of the Christ marked the transition from the Dispensation of Law to the Dispensation of Grace. Daniel had clearly prophesied that the exact time of Messiah's advent could be calculated from the issuing of the Persian decree to rebuild Jerusalem [DANIEL 9:25]. The Messiah was to come during the era of the fourth Gentile empire [DANIEL 2:31-45; 7:1-14]. First, Babylon, then Persia, followed by Greece and finally, Rome, had successively ruled over little Israel. The Magi recognised the significance of the era in which they lived, understanding that "the fullness of time had come," but Jewish religious leaders were ignorant of those same times.

As example of the inability of Jewish religious leaders to recognise the times, consider the following incidents drawn from the pages of the New Testament. The first relates an incident which occurred when the Pharisees and Sadducees approached Jesus asking that He show them a sign. Superficially, these religious leaders appear to be honest, but the Master, looking inward to their hearts, sees only wickedness. They appear to seek confirmation of what they knew to be true, but they are dishonest. "The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, 'When it is evening, you say, "It will be fair weather, for the sky is red." And in the morning, "It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening." You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah"' [MATTHEW 16:1-4].

Another incident when Jesus addressed the blindness of religious leaders is found in **LUKE 19:41-44**. “When [Jesus] drew near and saw the city, He wept over it, saying, ‘Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.’”

Paul recognised that the religious elite of the world was also spiritually ignorant. “Among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” [**1 CORINTHIANS 2:6-8**].

THE BIRTH OF GOD’S SON WAS A DETERMINED ACT — “God sent forth his Son.”

When Paul says, “God sent forth His Son,” he uses a verb that refers to someone who is sent out from. More particularly, the word refers to someone dispatched as an authoritative representative charged with a specific task. In fact, we would not be out of line to translate this clause, “God sent His Son on a mission.”

Throughout the Scriptures we read that God sent His Son—and that act was considered and deliberate rather than capricious or reactionary. What glorious verses the Apostle John has penned in his first epistle. “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins...

“We have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world” [**1 JOHN 4:9, 10, 14**].

Jesus our Lord acknowledged repeatedly that He was sent into the world for a specific purpose and by the determined will of the Father. Listen to a few of those instances. “I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak” [**JOHN 12:49**]. “Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me” [**JOHN 14:24**]. “I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’” [**JOHN 16:5**].

“This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent... I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me... As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world... May [they] all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me... May [they] become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me... O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me” [**JOHN 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25**].

“Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you’” [**JOHN 20:21**].

I have frequently reminded you that our Lord's advent was planned before the creation of the world, a truth which finite minds cannot fully comprehend. The teaching admits of no time before which God did not have in mind sending His Son as a sacrifice for sinful man. We have grasped the essence of the Good News if we can but approach the thrill of this truth: from eternity, God was committed to sending His Son.

It is definitely not inconsequential to note the submission demonstrated in this act. God the Father sent, and God the Son came. Never are we more like Christ than when we demonstrate a submissive spirit. However odious such submission may seem in the estimate of today's world, it is precisely a submissive spirit which Christ modelled and which God approves. Because we have refused to recognise this truth, substituting our own wicked ideas, we suffer in the church, in the home, and in society at large.

Churches suffer as otherwise good people act as dictators or ignore the Word of God. When the membership fails to submit to God's will and Word, jostling for power over others, churches are crippled and hindered in their service for Christ. Homes suffer as husbands abuse their positions of responsibility and as wives rebel against the headship of their husbands and as children reject parental responsibility for their welfare. Nations are in turmoil as citizens demonstrate rebellious attitudes, reject constituted authority, and as dictators institute new and novel forms of tyranny. What do you suppose would happen should each of us learn the repeated truths of the Word of God? Would there not result in all the land harmony and peace on an unprecedented scale?

"Submit[] to one another out of reverence for Christ" [EPHESIANS 5:21], teaches us that we are responsible to honour Christ through serving one another and refusing to compete for power over our fellow believers. Paul is here speaking about "Christ and the church" [EPHESIANS 5:32b].

When the Apostle provides instruction to husbands and wives, it is to establish that God does intend the home to operate with the man as the head of the home. "I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God" [1 CORINTHIANS 11:3]. If God is the head of Christ, is it demeaning to say that women are to recognise man's headship? Does such acknowledgement permit abuse by men anymore than saying that the head of every man is Christ? It is only our wicked hearts that distort God's teaching!

Is it demeaning to insist that we are to submit to government—even an arrogant government such as Paul knew under Nero—in light of the Word of God? Yet Paul wrote, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" [ROMANS 13:1].

Jesus recognised that civil authority resided in that which God permitted. He faced Pilate and boldly stated, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above" [JOHN 19:11a].

THE BIRTH OF OUR LORD WAS BY DELIBERATE MEANS — "God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law." Twice, the apostle emphasises this truth. He writes of Christ that He was "born of a woman." Again, he teaches that Jesus was "born under law." These two phrases cannot be separated from one another and still make sense; they must each be considered in their turn, weighing the significance of what is written if we have any hope of understanding the significance of God's glorious work in sending His Son.

Clearly, Paul refers to Christ's full humanity with this first term, “woman born” or “born out of woman.” That this is included in the same sentence as His identification as the Son of God would indicate that Paul intended to speak of this Jesus as the unique God-man—at once fully God and fully man. Surely, we must conclude that Paul was fully cognisant of the virgin birth and that this is his intended reference here. We know that Paul travelled for a long time in the company of Luke. Luke wrote the third Gospel—the Gospel account which bears his name. We could not believe anything other than that the Apostle was aware of the birth narratives that Luke included in chapters one and two of his Gospel.

Paul's use of this particular phrase [born out of woman] corresponds with the promise presented in **GENESIS 3:15**:

“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.”

The Seed of the Woman was promised to crush the serpent's head. No doubt the Apostle had also in mind the promise found in **ISAIAH 7:14** concerning the birth of Immanuel.

“The Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His Name Immanuel.” Whatever else was in his mind, Paul does make explicit reference to the virgin birth of the Son of God here. Of that we may be certain.

That second phrase, “born under the law,” is, for some, problematic. There is no article found in either of the phrases, and if the first points us automatically to the virgin birth of our Saviour, it should be no great surprise that the second points us just as quickly to His birth under the Law of Moses. Some may imagine that the term points only to His humanity, thus emphasising His human nature, since all men are under *nômos* of some kind. That such is wrong is evident from considering the verse which follows where we learn that the Saviour came to “redeem those under the law.” The law that is in view is the same one which enslaved men and necessitated redemption.

All are under law and therefore all alike are condemned. Read again those stunning words found in **ROMANS 3:10-20**, pausing to reflect on the application of the final two verses in the context of this verse.

“None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands;
no one seeks for God.
All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one.’
“Their throat is an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive.’
“The venom of asps is under their lips.’
“Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.’
“Their feet are swift to shed blood;

in their paths are ruin and misery,
and the way of peace they have not known.’
“‘There is no fear of God before their eyes.’

“Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”

All alike are under law, and therefore all alike are condemned. The significance of that statement is seen in verses preceding and following our text. Listen again to **GALATIANS 3:10-13** and **4:4, 5**. “All who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.’” Again, our text declares, “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.”

If you contend that these verses have no immediate application to us as Gentiles, I simply refer you to Paul's teaching found in **ROMANS 2:12-16**. “All who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.”

Moral law—whether codified in textual form such as is found in the Pentateuch, or whether resident in the conscience of man—condemns each of us as sinners. When we permit our minds to focus on our evil condition we are convinced that we cannot live lives unmarked by greed, unsullied by lust, free of hatred, unspoiled by lies—and we are confident that all such attitudes are contrary to divine law—to say nothing of natural law. That knowledge, coupled to the certainty that there is a righteous judge to whom we must give an account, condemns us in our own minds.

THE BIRTH OF GOD’S SON WAS FOR A DISTINCT PURPOSE — “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.” Regardless of what law may have been discussed earlier, the Mosaic Law is here included, as we have revealed God's distinct purpose in all this divine activity. In **GALATIANS 3:13**, we were said to have been redeemed “from the curse of the law.” The figure presented in the fifth verse of our text is bolder still; there, we are said to be redeemed from the law itself. The law is presented in this instance as a system of self-justification. Hence, the law can never attain its purported goal since man is incapable of justifying himself.

In GALATIANS 3:26-29 our position in Christ Jesus as “sons of God through faith” is affirmed. Then, shifting the imagery to our past universal experience, Paul vividly reminds us of our past enslavement by the “elementary principles of the world” [GALATIANS 4:3]. With this reminder firmly established for all who read this letter, Paul then presented the verses which have served as our text. From those verses, we have seen that the birth of Christ at a **definite time** was a **determined act** accomplished by **deliberate means** to effect a **distinct purpose**. That distinct purpose was that we who are the believers here addressed might be redeemed, and that having been purchased at infinite cost, we might receive adoption as sons.

Several words may enrich our insight in apostolic theology. First, Paul spoke of the purpose of Christ's coming as being “to redeem.” That word, *exagorâzo*, means quite literally *to purchase from the marketplace*—the *agora* being the marketplace and the preposition *ex* that is appended meaning *from out of*. In His death, Christ provided an infinite sacrifice which constitutes an infinite redemptive price. Therefore, we read the apostolic affirmation that Christ is “the Saviour of all people,” though this is practically true only for “those who believe” [see 1 TIMOTHY 4:10 and the more chilling 2 PETER 2:1].

The Apostle's intention clearly is to inform us that by Christ's redemption we have been accorded the full rights of sons—we have attained the status of sons. Motivated more by sociology than by theology, contemporary feminists, and feminised male apologists, often take umbrage at the adoption as sons. As a result, contemporary translations often drop the phraseology referring to our adoption as sons. In the day in which Paul wrote, Roman families made a distinction between a child and a son. A child might live in the home and even be informally acknowledged by the father, but the child was under the tutelage of a schoolmaster who bore responsibility for the child's preparation to advance in familial status. At the father's discretion, the child, who had no rights whatsoever, was one day formally and legally acknowledged as heir to the father. The child was then said to be adopted, to have been accorded the full rights of a son or to have attained the status of a son. That is the word used here—a legal term which is used in the New Testament only in a religious sense. Christ, by His redemption, insured that we are not merely children of God, but that we have been accorded full rights. This is a most significant development for each of us who share in this great family.

By faith we become “children of God” as outlined in JOHN 1:12. However, a regenerated sinner becomes a son of God by adoption [cf. GALATIANS 4:5]. A child is a child because he or she has his or her parents' nature, but the child is still immature and must grow into adulthood. Whereas in the material world a child does not enjoy mature responsibilities and privileges until reaching a predetermined age, in the spiritual realm a regenerated child is immediately placed in the position of sonship, enjoying all the privileges and responsibilities of sonship.

The noun which is translated “adoption” in GALATIANS 4:5 (*huiiothesía*) means *to be placed in the position of a son*. The Greek term was originally a legal technical term for adoption as a son with full rights of inheritance. Paul chose to use this word to teach us of a transferred sense of a transcendent filial relationship between God and humans (with the legal aspect, not gender specificity, as major semantic component). Although some modern translations remove the filial sense completely and render the term merely “adoption,” the retention of this component of meaning was accomplished in the present translation by the phrase “as sons.”

This adoption prepares us to receive the full rights of sons just as God determined in eternity past and as has been finalised by the work of the Holy Spirit at the point of conversion. This is the import of Paul's attestation that Christ came "to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" [GALATIANS 4:5]. That individual who was under the tutelage of the schoolmaster of law would never be regarded as a son. What a rich heritage we would sacrifice if we insist on gender-neutral language! What a sacrifice we are often asked to make to political correctness!

"Adoption as sons" emphasises that those to whom Paul is writing are in his estimate mature—fully competent to receive their inheritance now. Though the Galatians may not have necessarily acted in a mature manner, (actually they were acting in quite an immature fashion) they nevertheless were even then heirs with the full rights that belong to sons of God. Grasp this vital truth: you need not wait until some date far in the future to enjoy the full rights of sonship. This is your present heritage by faith in Christ. At the point you become a child of God, you receive the full rights of a son. Even now you enjoy access into the Father's presence, you enjoy the presence of His Holy Spirit, you possess for His glory unique spiritual gifts which He has distributed just as He decided, and you have the promise of Heaven and all that God has planned for His precious sons.

Don't get hung up on gender and become insulted by the language God uses. Gender is unimportant to the truth conveyed. Focus on the fact that you no longer require a baby-sitter because you have entered into your full right as a son of God. Before Him, you are already a recipient of all that He has promised. This is not to say that the Law no longer has any application in your life, but it does mean that it can no longer condemn you or hold you back; the Law need no longer imprison you or trip you up.

Whenever the wicked one comes to you pointing to your failure to keep the Law, you need but remind yourself that you are no longer under the Law but under grace and that you have received the adoption as a son of God. If you permit yourself to enter again the condemnation of the Law you are permitting yourself to be shackled, to be bewitched, and thus you turn your life in Christ into a pitiful anachronism of what has passed away.

Your receipt of the full rights as a son of God is through faith that you have now received this inheritance. We enter this new relationship with God through faith; we become children of God through faith in God. John says, "To all who believed in [Jesus'] Name, He gave the right to become children of God [JOHN 1:12b]. Just so, we receive our inheritance as sons of God through faith. We are not slaves, struggling to achieve freedom; we are sons of God equipped to enjoy our freedom now.

Is it not obvious that Christ is central to the Christian's right to access to the Father? Christ the Lord is at the heart of our salvation and service; Christ is the centre of all that the Christian is or does. The evidence that all this has been accomplished is the presence of God's Holy Spirit—the Spirit of His Son—in our hearts. We come eagerly into the presence of God; we actually long to be in His presence. We are no longer comfortable with the accoutrements of this world alone; we confess our desire to know the Father. In short, that Spirit living within us prompts us to cry out, "Abba! Father!"

The summary statement is provided in **verse seven**, where we are said to have transitioned from slave to son and transitioned again from son to heir. What more can God do than this He has done? We now have the adoption as sons, with the full rights that accompany that adoption. This is truly a reason to celebrate the Incarnation of the Lord Jesus. This is truly reason to rejoice in the goodness of God at this Christmastide.

This, then, is the joy of Christmas. It is a time of joy and increasing confidence for each Christian. It is a time of hope and renewed strength for us as members of the Family of God. And though the world celebrates in the only way the world can celebrate—focusing on self, we who are heirs of Christ commemorate His advent through telling others of what He has done that they also might share in this great gift. Who have you told? Who knows because of your witness?

And that is our invitation to you who yet stand apart from us as believers in the Son of God. In standing apart from us, you identify yourself as arrayed against God. We invite you to cease your rebellion, to believe the Good News of Christ, and to enter into the benefits of redemption—the full rights of sons. To you who are sons of God with the full rights of those adopted as sons, what keeps you apart from openly confessing this truth through obedience to Him beginning with baptism? You who have yet to unite with this church are called to openly employ your full rights as sons through investing your life with us in this church. Come; join this Body of Christ today. May God be glorified as He works in each of our hearts to accomplish His purpose to the praise of His glory. Amen.