

Christmas Eve 2011

I don't think you would disagree with me at all this evening if I were to suggest to you that in general, we as a culture are very impatient people. Somehow it's gotten into our mindset that faster is better. We want faster cars, faster computers and faster service. We want the express line at the supermarket, instant responses to our questions, up to the minute news reporting, quick recovery from illness, higher speed limits, streets plowed within an hour of snow fall and immediate return calls when we try to contact someone. In other words, we don't wait well. We want what we want, and we want it now.

Now as I considered being here this evening with you, I couldn't help but wonder how fast you have been moving all day in preparation for Christmas. My guess is that you have been in high gear moving at light speed most of the day today. Am I right? And further, many of us, although here physically at this moment, are fighting fast-moving thoughts about what yet lies ahead this evening. You don't need to raise your hands, but how many of you still have presents to wrap yet tonight?

In light of our preference for speed, my guess is that most of us have not taken the time this week to read the Bible accounts of the birth of Jesus. Now on the one hand, it's so familiar to us; why do we need to read it again? But in addition to that, the account of Jesus' birth in the gospels contains 48 verses in Matthew and a whopping 120 verses in Luke's account. Given the business of this season and the break-neck speed at which we have been running, who has time to read all of that?

Well, in that light I have very good news for you this afternoon. You see, there is a passage of scripture, two verses to be exact, that places on display the full purposes of God in bringing about the first Christmas. I am thinking of what the Apostle Paul wrote in Galatians 4:4-5. In fact, I think it summarizes Christmas so well that I am going to have it put on the screen so you can look at it with me. What I want to do briefly tonight is break it down into several parts and all for the purpose of insuring that we, in the midst of our busyness and hurry, don't lose sight of God at work in the wonderful manner in which he brought about the birth of his Son.

Take a look at what Paul wrote, for it contains the heart of what Christmas is all about. He wrote, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."

Now since I began this message with a reference to time, isn't it interesting that the verse makes mention of time in the opening phrase; "But when the fullness of time had come." That leads to a very reasonable question. Why did Jesus come when he did? After all, there were centuries of human history that came before his birth. Over those centuries, empires rose and fell; kings ruled the earth and many wars were fought. In addition, the Bible tells us that, way back in the Garden of Eden, God promised Adam that a savior would come. A lot of time

passed between the garden and the birth of Christ. So the question remains; why then? Would there not have been a more opportune time for Christ to be born?

Well, the answer to that question lies in the word *fullness*. What it tells us is that God had a predetermined timeframe, and that according to his predetermined time, the world was simply not ready until the precise moment God determined, not earlier and not later. That’s amazing, is it not? Christ was born at the exact and predetermined time God purposed.

Some of us struggle with being on time for anything. Yet God established from eternity past a set, specific and ideal time for Jesus to be born. And further, he divinely orchestrated world events so that the timing of Christ’s birth was absolutely perfect. He didn’t come too early or too late. He came at just the right time.

Now to our way of thinking, it’s reasonable to wonder why then; why there; why to those people? After all, in our technologically advanced day, the birth of a savior could have been broadcast live to the entire world. Yet the passage tells us that the time was not right; it was not full until the precise moment God determined.

That brings a deep sense of wonder to me as I consider that God’s timing is usually not ours. He has his own way of accomplishing his purposes and the means he chooses; the timing he chooses is contrary to how we would do things if given the chance.

Now in addition to the timing of Christ’s birth, note what the second part of the passage tells us. We are told that the baby that God sent was his Son. Wow. In that light, people have been asking for centuries the most important question mankind has ever had to deal with. Who is Jesus Christ? At one strategic point in his earthly ministry Jesus asked Peter that same question. Who do men say that I am? Peter responded, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Now my sense is that you would not be here this evening if you didn’t believe that. Why come to church on Christmas Eve if you do not agree that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God? After all, there are lots of birthdays we celebrate over the course of the year. I’m speaking of birthdays of famous and historically significant people. Yet do any of us put the same effort into or attach the same significance to the birthdays of other important historical figures?

Consider this; the world has basically come to a standstill tonight because of the birth of a baby born 2000 years ago. You see, the extraordinary power and mystery of Christmas is that the baby conceived miraculously in Mary’s womb, and born at just the right time, was God in the flesh. And if you believe that, it means that you must also embrace everything else the Bible tells us about him. You can’t have one without the other. You can’t believe that he’s the Son of God and discard everything else the Bible says about him.

That has life changing implications for each of us; and frankly, I can’t think of a better time to consider the implications of Peter’s statement - “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” - than on Christmas Eve.

There is more; the verse also tells us that Christ was born of a woman. But this was an extraordinary young woman in every respect. She was profoundly open to God and willing to lay down her life and reputation to see God’s plan come to pass. When the angel Gabriel announced to her that she would conceive a son even though she was a virgin, she humbly accepted God’s plan. She said, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.”

Yes; at the right time God sent his Son, born of a woman, so that Jesus could be fully man and fully God. Anything short of that would not have allowed him to fulfill the purpose for which God sent him in the first place.

But note the next phrase, “Born under the law.” Now no one today particularly enjoys discussing God’s law, and that’s because of what it says about us and our standing before a holy God. The Bible makes it clear that all men are under God’s law; and to be perfectly honest, we don’t like what it says about us. God’s law points out our sin; that we have failed to adhere to God’s standards. Thus his law condemns us. Who wants to think about that on Christmas Eve?

Yet the fact that God sent his Son, born under the law, reminds us that we too are under the law and the condemnation it brings upon us. In another place Paul wrote, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” So put that all together. Here we have a child, the Son of God, born at just the right time, born of a woman, and born under the law with all that implies.

Now it’s a very good thing for us that the verse does not end at that point. Take a look at the final part of the passage: “To redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons.” There is a world of theology in that phrase. Inherent in it is the full and real purpose of what we celebrate tonight.

You see, the birth of Christ is not the end of the Christmas story. It’s not even the beginning of it. It was never intended by God to be so. As it relates to God’s overall plans for the ages, the birth of Christ kind of fits somewhere in the middle. It represents another portion, a very pleasant one to be sure, in God’s overall purposes for his creation.

Now as it relates to the Christmas story and to Jesus, many today are happy to acknowledge that he was a great teacher and role model for all to follow. Some may even acknowledge that he was the Son of God. But the last part of the verse displays the full measure of God’s purpose in sending him. Jesus primary mission was not to teach or to perform miracles or to be a role model for all to follow; and it was most certainly not for us to decorate a tree and exchange presents each year. There’s nothing wrong with any of that, but to focus on that misses the point. Jesus himself described his primary purpose when he said, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Did you catch that? Don’t miss it. He came to “give his life as a ransom.”

Now the word “ransom” is interesting in the original language. It literally means to pay a price for the purpose of redeeming something that was lost. I’m sure you paid a price for the gifts you will open later today. But the difference is that they were not lost; they were simply

not in your possession yet. So if we are to fully understand the last part of the verse, we have to come to the place of seeing that what really took place on Christmas was this: As Savior was born who would one day redeem the world from the curse of the law by deliberately and voluntarily sacrificing his own life, a perfectly sinless life, in order to redeem mankind. That’s a heavy price, but a necessary one given the magnitude of man’s sin. It was the price God had in mind from the very beginning. It was part of the divine plan that involved the fullness of time for Christ’s birth.

Look now at the ultimate outcome of God sending forth his Son at just the right time to redeem those who were under the law. The final part of the verse says, “So that we might receive adoption as sons.” That’s a staggering thought. You see, that final phrase represents the true and full purpose of the Christmas story. It all comes together with that statement.

Why did Jesus, the Son of God, come in the fullness of time, born of a woman, born under the law? He came to redeem sinners; and in doing so, to make those who were not sons, sons of God. His birth, his life, his death and his resurrection were all for the purpose of making us sons of God. Thus, through Jesus Christ, each of us has the opportunity to become adopted sons of God. That’s the full meaning of what we celebrate on Christmas. Anything less diminishes what God purposed from eternity past and brought to bear in the fullness of time.

I can only imagine what lies ahead for you in the next 24 hours. My guess is that many of you will hurry home, hurry dinner, hurry cleaning up, hurry to sit around the tree, hurry to open presents, hurry to bed, hurry to get up and open more presents, and perhaps hurry to Grandma’s house, whatever that means for you. In the midst of your hurry, you’ve likely not had time to work your way through Matthew or Luke’s descriptions of the birth of Christ. I understand. It is indeed a very busy and fast-paced time.

But I trust that the two verses we have glanced at tonight serve to bring you a sense of what Christmas involves from God’s perspective.

In his timing: the fullness of time

He sent his most precious possession, a divine Son

Employing his means: a young virgin

Under his rules: the law

For his purpose: to redeem men

With us in mind: adoption as sons.

Friends I trust that these truths will make the glow of Christmas even greater in your heart as you embrace all that the baby Jesus truly means to us this Christmas.