

When the Set Time had Fully Come

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks very much, Aaron. Good morning, everyone. I repeat, Graeme's welcome, whether you're in the building, watching the live stream, or listening to the audio recording later. It will be helpful if you have a Bible in front of you, turn to Galatians 4, you'll follow what I have to say a bit better.

I recently bought a book. I buy actually lots of books on my Kindle when they're on special offer. There's monthly special offers, daily special offers, and I'm a real sucker for them. And I particularly like darling Kindle books. I'm sure some of you have come across them. I like them because they've got great pictures and nice little bite-sized chunks of text.

So recently, a book came up that was called Timelines of World History, and I thought, I need that. I paid my £1.99, downloaded it onto my tablet, and then immediately scroll through to see what is said around this year zero, to see what is said about the life of Jesus.

And there were two entries on the life of Jesus. One recorded his birth and got about the same amount of space as the building of Herod's temple, and the other was about his crucifixion and had about the same number of words as the Roman invasion of Britain.

In total, about 120 words covering the lifetime of Jesus. Now, I'm not here to criticise DK. I suspect what they've done would reflect what a lot of people think about the life of Jesus.

[1 : 2 6] That's an event in world history. It has significance, particularly because of its lasting effects. But it's just one event among hundreds that we could look at.

But how different that is from what Paul says in our passage today. He says in verse 4, When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son.

For Paul, the coming of Jesus wasn't just one kind of random event that happened sometime in history, long ago and far away. It was a key moment, it was the key moment in the history of our world, planned by God, and happening at exactly the right time.

It was the moment when God intervened in human history to resolve our biggest problem, and to do it not from afar, but by sending his own Son to come and live among us and to die for us.

We commemorate that every time we write the date. Now, I know these days some people prefer to say Christian era, a common era and before Christian era, but we know that actually our calendar is based on an assumed date for the birth of Jesus.

[2 : 3 9] So every time we write the date, we're saying here's roughly how long it is since Jesus was born. It is the most significant event in history, the life and the death of Jesus.

It brought us the possibility of freedom from guilt, of a relationship with God as our Father, and of a glorious future inheritance. That really deserves all the attention we can give it.

We're going to dig into the passage, but before we do that, let's just pick up on that phrase that I mentioned. When the set time had fully come. What does Paul mean by that?

Well, we could note that it's not unique in the New Testament. In Romans chapter 5, Paul says, At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

If we go back a bit further to John the Baptist, John says, The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.

[3 : 46] But why is the timing emphasized so much? Well, ultimately, God's sovereign and this side of heaven, we won't really know the full answer. But let me suggest a few reasons why the timing of Jesus coming into this world could be seen as just right.

So first, if you look at the political situation in that day. Rome ruled the world. And the Pax Romana, by and large, brought peace.

So it was safe to travel around, for instance, when Paul and others were taking the gospel. You didn't have to worry too much about borders between regions because they were all part of the Roman Empire.

Then communications were better than they'd ever been. The Romans had built these wonderful roads that led to Rome, but went through every significant city on the way.

So to travel around was easy. And the Greek language was known throughout the empire, certainly among educated people. So whether the Bible was spoken or written down in Greek, a lot of people all around the world would understand it.

[4 : 56] And if we look at the religious situation then, pagans were searching for something. The hope that the Roman and Greek gods had known them for many hundreds of years was loosening a bit.

And they were searching for something that was a bit more relevant to their lives. And in the Jewish nation, the burden of the law, which we'll be coming back to, that had become particularly onerous.

The Pharisees and the other religious leaders were putting more and more on top of what the Old Testament really says. And the people were saying there must be something better than this. They were looking for real freedom.

And of course these circumstances which made the spread and acceptance of the gospel so much easier didn't happen by chance. God had ordered things so that it would be that way, so the condition would be right when Jesus came.

And so, says Paul, when the time had fully come, when the world was ready for a Messiah, God sent his Son. If we really believe that, it should never cease to amaze us.

[6 : 06] The creator of the universe came into this world as one of us. He knew joys and sorrows like we do. He had friends and opponents as we do.

He suffered and died as we do. God sent his Son. So we're going to think about that under three headings, dividing the passage.

A bit of a plethora of Ps this morning. So verses 1 to 3 we're saying is the past problem. Verses 4 to 6, the pivotal person, that's Jesus. And verses 6 to 7, the present privileges that we can enjoy if we're Christians.

But just to recap briefly first, we're looking of course at Paul's letter to churches in Galatia. Galatia is in what is today a central Turkey area, kind of around Ankara. And Paul was writing to places like Derbe, Iconium and Lystra that he had visited on his missionary journeys.

Now these churches have been infiltrated by people known as Judaators. People who insisted that faith in Jesus had to be accompanied by adherence to the law of Moses.

[7 : 22] And Paul wants to make it very clear that's wrong. To add to the gospel is to take away from the gospel. As Graham has reminded us several times in recent weeks, salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

In chapter 3, Paul compares faith in Christ and works of the law. And he goes right back to Abraham and the promises that were made to him that point forward to Jesus.

He then explains why the law is necessary, but it also holds us in custody, acting as a guardian until Christ came. And he ends with a great reminder that for those who are in Christ Jesus, for those who know Jesus as saviour, there's no distinction of ethnicity or of social status or of gender.

We're all one in Christ Jesus and we're all Abraham's children and heirs to the promise that God made to Abraham. Another passage today, Paul is expanding on and explaining that a bit more.

So first, the past problem. Paul uses a picture here of which some of it will be familiar enough, some of it is more specific to his day. He says, imagine a child in a rich family.

[8 : 50] That child knows that ultimately he's going to inherit everything that his father has. But while he's a child, he's not going to be given the authority to do very much with it.

Paul says he's going to be subject to guardians and trustees. Guardians are probably those who look after the son. Trustees are those who look after the estate. Might well themselves have been slaves.

But Paul says the son in that situation actually isn't in a much better situation than being a slave. He has people who are telling him what to do and who are correcting him if they feel he's gone wrong.

Now, of course, that's perfectly sensible. That's still what we do with children today. And we want to teach them to make good decisions and to obey in a way that is right. And for those of us who are Christians, to come to faith in Jesus.

But it could be quite frustrating, you can imagine, for the child. Particularly because the father in a Roman house would probably have quite a lot of discretion over what age he chose for the child to have the full rights of an heir.

[10 : 00] Could be 18, could be 20, something else. The father one day would say, that's it, you've grown up now, you're mature, you're able to handle things and to make your own decisions. Now you can be the inheritor of the estate.

So during the period in between, perhaps the child was living and thinking, holding on to the promise saying, yes, one day I'm going to get this, even though now I'm feeling that I'm being told what to do and maybe I resent it a bit.

So Paul says that's a bit like it was before Jesus came. That's how it was particularly for the Jews. They were in slavery and therefore caused the elemental spiritual forces of the world.

That's quite a difficult phrase. It's also a phrase there's a lot of debate on among those who study the Bible and the Greek original. I think a better translation is in the ESV, which talks about the elementary principles of the world.

So let's take that one and think about it. In any civilisation, you have rules that are imposed on us. You could call them the ABCs of living in society.

[11 : 16] So we might wonder, for instance, if we're driving on a Saturday, I've come to a single airline, is it okay to park here on a Saturday or isn't it? Or if we're filling in a tax return, we might think, well, do I need to declare this bit of income or is it not really taxable?

Lots of different things that aid the smooth running of society but can be a bit confusing, perhaps a bit burdensome at times.

And that happens in every society. If you're going to have a decent civilisation, you need to have rules that people understand and they follow. But how much more that was the case in Israel with the law of Moses, particularly in the way it was applied by ultra-Orthodox Jews, who took what was in the law, what was in the Old Testament of our Bible, but who added to it so they could not have any possibility that they would break the rules.

Add lots of little trivial things that the people were still expected to obey. And the law, which was in principle a good thing, as Paul has explained in chapter 3, it had become an enormous burden.

It had really enslaved the people and they were having no joy in their lives and no real relationship with God as someone they could love and could spend time with.

[12 : 40] But there was hope. As Graham took us through in chapter 3, there was the promise that came to Abraham. One day the offspring of Abraham, that is Jesus, would come.

One day all barriers of ethnicity, class, gender would be broken down. One day all those who put their trust in the one sent by God would themselves be adopted as children of God and heirs of his promise.

One day, but they didn't know when it was going to be. And then the time set by God fully came and he sent his son.

So we're now in verses 4 and 5 and I think it's worth our while slowing down a little bit because there's an awful lot in these verses that we can hold on to. So Paul says, God sent his son born of a woman.

Jesus never stopped being God. He had all the power, the purity, the wisdom and all the other characteristics of his divine nature.

[13 : 48] And yet at the same time, he was fully human. He was God's son born of a woman. His conception was miraculous.

There was no man involved. But otherwise he came into the world like the rest of us. Conceived by the Holy Spirit but born naturally to Mary and living as a man among men just like us but never losing his divinity.

He was always God with us. Then says Paul, He was born of a woman born under the law.

Jesus' mother Mary was a Jew. Her husband Joseph was also a Jew. And Jesus was brought up in the Jewish nation.

So all his life he was subject to the law which had become such a burden to the Jewish people. He observed the Sabbath and the various feast days of the Jews.

[14 : 50] He ate the food that was prescribed by the law. He made the required sacrifices. And he obeyed the moral code. And he did all of that perfectly.

As God, he was able to do what no one else could do and to live a life that was absolutely without sin. And it's because of that that he was able to fulfill the mission he came for.

He was born under the law to redeem those under the law. Because Jesus was absolutely sinless, he was able to pay the redemption price to free us when he died on the cross.

God made the one who had no sin in him to be sin for us, taking our sin on him. Taking the punishment that was rightly ours for our sins to give us hope and a future.

And what a future that was. Because Paul says he came to redeem those under the law that we might receive adoption to sonship.

[16 : 03] So when we put our trust in Jesus, it's not just that our sins are forgiven. It's marvelous, wonderful, that all the wrong things we've done can be forgiven through Jesus.

But there's much more to it than that. When our trust is in Jesus, we are adopted as sons of God. We become those who are members of God's family.

No wonder John writes in his first letter, see what great love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are.

That is what we are. If our trust is in Jesus today, if we've accepted him as our saviour, then we are children of God. We are heirs with Jesus.

We have the wonderful promises that God gives us. Let's rejoice that at the time set by God, he sent his son into the world.

[17 : 03] And that makes a world of difference to us. As him says, What a wonderful thing Jesus has done for us.

And that brings us on to the last little section, which I've called the present privileges. And they also are truly wonderful. Paul writes in verse 6, Because you are his sons, God sent the spirit of his son into our hearts, the spirit who calls out, Abba, Father.

God didn't only send his son into the world. He sent his spirit into the hearts of those who believe in him. The Holy Spirit who empowers us, who encourages us, who changes our lives to be more like Jesus.

And who particularly in this context gives us the assurance of salvation and the assurance that we are God's children. Paul says the spirit calls out.

I think that means that we call out inspired by the spirit. Now my reason for saying that is in Romans 8, verses 15 and 16, that there's a similar kind of passage where Paul says, By him we cry, Abba, Father.

[18 : 38] The spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. So if we are Christians, if we have our trust in the Lord Jesus, the spirit gives us the assurance that we really are God's children.

That doesn't mean we never doubt. I'm sure all of us have doubts at times about our salvation. But we do have the spirit who reassures us, who encourages us to believe that because we've trusted in Jesus, then we have been saved.

We are children of God. And through him we cry, Abba, Father. Abba is a Greek word for father.

But that doesn't hardly begin to describe it. It's not just a statement of fact. It's more of a shout of affection, an intimate relationship.

I think of it as being like a child. If your dad's been away for a while, you've got a young child, and dad walks in the door, and the child rushes into his arms and says, Daddy, Daddy. It's a bit like that with us and God.

[19 : 44] We should have a real excitement and joy that God is our father. And as the child goes into the father's arms, the father accepts it, gives them the reassurance that they do belong, can comfort and encourage them, can ask about what's happening in their lives, and is happy to listen to their problems and anything they want to say.

And again, that is similar to what our relationship with God can be like in a much more wonderful way. God wants us as our heavenly father, as Abba, to come to him with all our thoughts, with our thanksgiving, with our concerns, with whatever is on our heart, and to share them with him.

He wants us to see him as a loving heavenly father who's able to protect and to help us in every aspect of life. What a wonderful privilege that is to be able to call God our father.

But then Paul also says in verse 7, Since you are his child, God has also made you an heir. In the Roman world, if a family adopted a child, a father adopted a child, they became entitled to just as much as the biological children were.

They were entitled to inherit the estate alongside any others. And Paul says, Because we are God's child, then we have become heirs alongside Jesus of the inheritance that belongs to Jesus by right.

[21 : 22] Now what does that mean? There's definitely a present aspect to this. We have the status of being God's children. We have God's spirit in our lives as his seal of ownership and his reminder of what has happened to us through Jesus.

We have God's hand over our life like a loving father that he is. His hand is on us. He is working everything for our good. I maybe should also add that in the Bible being described as heirs, also often comes alongside the thought that we should be willing to suffer in a godless world as Jesus did.

And we will ultimately be rewarded for that. But it's a tremendous privilege in this world to be heirs of God. But then there's a future aspect to this as well.

There's an inheritance to look forward to. To see that, let's be end as I started with another timeline. My timeline is very simple.

It's only got six events on it. God created everything. Sin entered the world. Then there are the three we've already referred to.

[22 : 37] God's promise being given to Abraham, the law being given to Moses, and God sending his son to be our saviour. And then the sixth one hasn't happened yet.

The second coming of Jesus. Jesus, the Bible clearly teaches, is coming back again. Coming to take those who know him and love him to be with himself, coming also to be the judge.

There will be similarities to his first coming. Jesus' second coming has long been promised and anticipated by those who trust in him.

And yet, like his first coming, there is a date that has been set by God, but we don't know when it is. Could be any time, could be very soon, could be a distance in the future.

So similar to the first one, there's a promise. We know if we believe in Jesus that it will be fulfilled, but we don't know when. But there is a big difference.

[23 : 40] It's the difference of purpose. The first time Jesus came, it was to be our saviour and redeemer. It was to live a simple, poor life, to serve others, ultimately to be rejected and to be crucified as he died on the cross.

Of course, he rose again and then went to heaven. When he comes back on a day that's been appointed by God, Jesus will judge the world with righteousness and justice.

Those who haven't got their faith in him will face God's punishment for their sins, the paternal punishment. While those who trust in Jesus will enter into his inheritance, which is also their inheritance.

That's the most important decision any of us will ever make, whether our trust is in Jesus for our salvation. For those who enter into the inheritance, since Peter describes it as one that can never perish or fade, kept in heaven for us.

Jesus calls it treasure in heaven where moths and vermin do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal. So at the very least, we can get from that, that is something whose attractions will never fade.

[25 : 01] We won't get tired of being with Jesus in heaven or get bored up there. It is going to be something wonderful. Beyond that, we don't really know an awful lot about what it means.

We do know, though, that heaven will be a place where there will be no death, there will be no suffering, there will be no sin, and everything else that holds us back and that makes this world in many ways a difficult place for us, that will be behind us.

We will be with Jesus forever. We will be perfectly happy. Our joy will be complete, and we'll be living the life God has planned for us. We will come into the inheritance that is ours through Jesus.

What a difference it makes that God sent his son. If God hadn't sent his son, there was no way we could have the relationship restored that was there in the beginning with Adam and Eve that was broken by sin.

Without Jesus, we couldn't get back into a relationship with God. Without Jesus, we would die in our sins and would face the punishment for them.

[26 : 17] So let's all of us, let's make sure our faith is in him. Let's make sure our future is secure. And then let's really rejoice in what Jesus has done for us.

In the sins forgiven and in our wonderful status of being God's children, joint heirs with Jesus. The hymn I quoted earlier ends like this.

One day the trumpet will sound for his coming. One day the skies with his glory will shine. Wonderful day, my beloved one bringing. Glorious Saviour, this Jesus is mine.

Living he loved me. Dying he saved me. Buried he carried my sins far away. Rising he justified freely forever. One day he's coming.

Oh, glorious day. If your trust is in Jesus, look forward to that day but also enjoy the great privileges you have now as being God's children and having his spirit with us.

[27 : 19] Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for this wonderful passage we've looked at this morning. We thank you for the great truth that at just the right time you sent your son into the world to be our Saviour.

And we thank you for what that means, that we can come to you as God but also say, Abba, Father. No fear because we know that through Jesus we are your children and we can come into your presence.

Thank you for the great prospect that is there for those whose trust is in Jesus that one day he'll return and we'll be with him forever in the glorious inheritance that is his and is now ours.

We pray to help all of us to put our trust in him and then to have that confidence that you are our Heavenly Father who cares for every aspect of our lives.

Thank you for our time together. Thank you for the opportunity to sing your praises and to pray and to study your word and we pray for your blessing on us now in Jesus' name. Amen.