

# Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

For reply: Email: [truthfortoday@aol.com](mailto:truthfortoday@aol.com)

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**Speaker:** Mr. Gordon Kell

## A Christmas Message: When the fullness of the time had come

Today our Christmas message is based on Galatians 4:1-7, part of Paul's letter to the Galatians. Let's read the passage: *"Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all, but is under guardians and stewards until the time appointed by the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, 'Abba, Father!' Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ."*

I was impressed with four things Paul refers to in Galatians 4:1-7 that relate to Christ's coming into the world,

1. **God's perfect timing**, *"But when the fullness of the time had come"* (Galatians 4:4);
2. **God's perfect gift**, *"God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law"* (Galatians 4:4);
3. **God's perfect salvation**, *"to redeem those who were under the law"* (Galatians 4:5);
4. **God's perfect blessing** *"that we might receive the adoption as sons"* (Galatians 4:5).

### 1. God's perfect timing

First, let's consider God's perfect timing (Galatians 4:1-4). Someone once said God's clock is never slow and never fast. God's timing is always perfect. Paul writes in Galatians 4:1-3 of the timing of the greatest event in history when God in the Person of His Son entered the world He had created. Paul describes it in this way, *"when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son"* (Galatians 4:4).

God's perfect timing is seen throughout the whole of the Old Testament. Its history, prophecies and promises recorded in God's dealings with people as individuals, families, tribes, nations and empires all look forward a Saviour who would come into the world.

It is helpful to briefly trace the perfect timing of God over the course of Old Testament history. In Genesis God describes the wondrous features of His creation in seven days (Genesis 1:1-2:3). God teaches us about the blessing and fall of man within the brief time spent by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:4-3:17). God unfolds the development of a world increasingly alienated from Him, leading up to the Genesis flood (Genesis 4:1-6:12). But during this period God provides timely witnesses to the power of His salvation.

We see this in Hebrews 11.

In Hebrews 11:4, Abel (see Genesis 4:1-15) teaches the need for a perfect sacrifice, *"By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks."*

In Hebrews 11:5-6, Enoch (see Genesis 4:17-5:24) teaches about knowing God through faith; *"By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, and was not found, because God had taken him; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God. But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him."*

In Hebrews 11:7, Noah teaches God's power to save (Genesis 6:1-9:17), *"By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household."*

After the flood God chooses one man, Abraham, to teach us about the life of faith. At specific times He revealed His great promises to Abraham (see Genesis 12:1-9) and those promises began to be fulfilled through a child (see Genesis 15:1-21). But Abraham and Sarah were a childless couple. God, in an astonishing way, provides a child in their old age (see Genesis 17:15-22). The timing of Isaac's birth was the evidence of God's intervention to bring about the birth of a nation, Hebrews 11:8-12, *"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of*

*promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude - innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore."*

After providing an only child, remarkably God asks Abraham to offer his only son, Isaac, as a sacrifice (see Genesis 22:1-19). Abraham's complete faith in God is described in Hebrews 11:17-19: *"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, 'In Isaac your seed shall be called,' concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense."*

Abraham sacrificed a ram caught in a thicket by his horns in place of his son (Genesis 22:13). The ram was a substitute. It seems to me that, in the character of Isaac, God appears to foretell the coming of His only Son into the world by miraculous means to become to our saviour by going into death in our place. At the same time, Isaac was not sacrificed there was a substitute. But there was no substitute for Jesus. He became our substitute. *"If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"* (Romans 8:31-32).

These verses demonstrate God's never-ending love for us:

- *"...Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"* (Romans 8:34-35)
- *"Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 8:37-39).

God's perfect timing is also illustrated in the life of Isaac's own son Jacob. Jacob had twelve sons who became the heads of the tribes of Israel. But it is one of these sons, Joseph, who, in Egypt, becomes the saviour of the embryonic nation (see Genesis 37-45). The sufferings of Joseph at the hands of his brothers and as a slave in Egypt and his subsequent glory as the saviour of that nation are a wonderful illustration of the suffering and glory of the Person of Christ.

Many years later, when the children of Israel were enslaved by the Egyptians, God's perfect timing is highlighted in the birth of yet another child - Moses. After living in Egypt for forty years (see Acts 7:23), then a further forty years in the land of Midian (see Acts 7:29), Moses is chosen by God to lead the nation of Israel out of Egypt, *"By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden three months by his parents, because they saw he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king's command. By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, lest he who destroyed the firstborn should touch them. By faith they passed through the Red Sea as by dry land, whereas the Egyptians, attempting to do so, were drowned"* (Hebrews 11:23-29).

The subsequent history of the Judges relates the failures of God's people, God's discipline and their recovery. Over and over again God acted at just the right time to deliver them. It is the last of these judges, Samuel, whose life demonstrates this in the most powerful way.

At a time when His nation was so far from Him and when the high priest's family were utterly corrupt God provides a child to another childless woman, Hannah (see 1 Samuel 1:1-2:17). Hannah presented Samuel to God (see 1 Samuel 1:28) and he grows up to become the prophet who leads the nation Israel back to God.

However, in spite of Samuel's faithful service, Israel wanted a king to become like other nations (see 1 Samuel 8:15). Under God's instruction, Samuel oversees the anointing of the first two kings of Israel, Saul (see 1 Samuel 9:1-12:25) and David (See 1 Samuel 16:1-13).

First, God gave Israel the kind of they wanted, Saul. Saul, like Cain, Ishmael and Esau, was typical of the natural man. As such Saul failed in his kingly responsibilities and God chose David, a young shepherd, to become Israel's greatest king and the father of Solomon (see 2 Samuel 12:24).

God's perfect timing is seen when this young shepherd comes from shepherding his father's sheep to destroy the giant Goliath (see 1 Samuel 17:1-58) and deliver Israel from their invincible enemy. This great victory so clearly illustrates the coming of Jesus Christ, the Good, Great and Chief Shepherd (see John 10:11, Hebrews 13:20 and 1 Peter 5:4 respectively).

The history of the nation under the kings leads first to the division of what had been David and Solomon's glorious kingdom and then to the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. During these periods God appeals to His people through the prophets to return to Him and promises a coming king like no other.

God's perfect timing is then seen in the way God ensured His people were protected and served Him at the very centre of the governments of the Babylonian and Medo-Persian empires. Ezekiel, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, Mordechai and Esther, Ezra and Nehemiah and prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi were all instrumental in declaring the counsels of God and the return of the people of God to the land God had promised them.

In the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar God unfolds what is called in the New Testament, "*the times of the Gentiles*" (see Luke 21:24). This period is outlined in King Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a great image in Daniel 2:31-35. Daniel interpreted the dream and explained that the image represented the empire of Babylon and the Medo-Persian, Grecian and Roman empires that would succeed it.

It was during these captivities and the period between the Old and New Testaments that Jewish people also began to settle in many parts of the world and developed the incredibly widespread synagogue system. The synagogues were houses of assembly, prayer and the study of the Old Testament scriptures. These synagogues developed by the scattered people of God were used to enormous effect in spreading the gospel far and wide. God's scattering of His people became the means by which men and women of all nations came to the Saviour.

After experiencing captivity, the Jews were not marked by idolatry but by a commitment to the Law of Moses. And when the New Testament opens we discover an Israel under Roman rule with political and religious classes marked by self-righteousness and self-interest. But we also see a Godly remnant who waited for the coming Messiah. At the same time, the world was also changing as the Romans integrated and developed their empire, travel became easier and safer, and cultures were more aware of each other. The world was getting ready for a great moment.

At the beginning of the New Testament, God then intervenes again in history by the promise of the birth of a child to another childless couple called Zachariah and Elizabeth (see Luke 1:5-25, and Luke 1:57-58). This was consistent with the way God miraculously intervened to provide the promised heir to childless Abraham and Sarah (see Genesis 17:15-22 and then repeated this to provide childless Hannah with a son (1 Samuel 1:20). God's intervention in the lives of Zachariah and Elizabeth provided the prophet John the Baptist, who would herald the greatest child of all - Jesus Christ (See John 1:29, John 1:36).

The events we have traced are all specific times in which God moved in remarkable ways throughout history. They all looked forward to the most important set time of all, the moment, "*...when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law*" (Galatians 4:4-5)

Then God acts supremely in the promise of a child, not to an elderly childless couple, but to a young virgin, Mary. The birth of Jesus is the most extraordinary evidence of God's perfect timing. "*the fullness of the time...*" (Galatians 4:4) was the time appointed by the God the Father. It was precisely the right time, in relation to the political, moral and religious condition of the world, that Christ came.

Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the great image began with the Babylonian empire and foretold the Roman Empire. And it was the Roman Emperor Augustus who decided to undertake a census of his empire (Luke 2:1). The effect of this edict was that all the people in the empire began to move back to the cities where they were born (Luke 2:3). Some moved great distances. Some moved tiny distances. All moved, as it were, to the places where their lives began.

But it wasn't the Emperor Augustus who moved the world. It was God who moved the world through Emperor Augustus. Just as he had used Cyrus to begin moving the Jews back to Israel, God moved the people of the earth to ensure one Person would be born in a tiny town called Bethlehem (see Micah 5:2). But that day God did not just move earth, He moved Himself. In the Person of Christ, Immanuel, God moved from heaven to earth. The Creator moved into the creation, "*And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn*" (Luke 2:1-7).

God's perfect timing was the means by which He stepped into time, to be born, to grow, to work, to love, to heal, to forgive, to bless, to become poor, to suffer and to die to show to us Who He is.

## 2. God's perfect gift

Now let's consider our second heading, God's perfect gift. *"God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law..."* (Galatians 4:4).

John 3:16 also records, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

In John 3:16, a remarkable verse the extent of God's love is described in the word "gave". At Christmas we are constantly reminded about buying and giving gifts. These gifts range in value. Some are treasured for a lifetime other are quickly discarded. God is not speaking about giving things, however valuable these may be. He is speaking about giving Himself. This began at the incarnation, but it was only the beginning. The name *"Immanuel"* means, *"God with us"* (see Matthew 1:23). God gave Himself. Paul's explains this giving in several ways,

- *"... the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me"* (Galatians 2:20);
- *"Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her"* (Ephesians 5:25); and
- *"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich"* (2 Corinthians 8:9).

God's perfect gift is His Son, Jesus Christ. The message of the angel in Luke 2:10-11 was, *"Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord."* The words, *"For there is born to you..."* emphasise God's gift to us - His perfect gift.

## 3. God's perfect salvation

Our third heading is, God's perfect salvation, *"to redeem those who were under the law..."* (Galatians 4:5). It was not only that God sent His Son into the world but the way in which He came. Jesus was sent from God to be born of a woman and to become a man. The reality of the incarnation is being emphasised by Paul in this passage. Christ was also, *"under the law"* and the One Who was the lawgiver submits Himself to the yoke of His own law. He keeps its precepts and suffers under its curse (Galatians 3:13). He came to do God's will, He came down from heaven and He came in the flesh. He did this to redeem from the law through His death upon the cross that *"we might receive the adoption of sons"* (Galatians 4:5).

Jesus was the King of the Jews (see Matthew 2:2, also Matthew 27:37, Mark 15:26, Luke 23:38 and John 19:19) - that's who the wise men came to worship (see Matthew 2:1-12). But He was not born in a palace. He was the Son of God, but He did not appear in majestic glory. He didn't come as a mature man in the way God created Adam. He was born of a woman just as we were. He was born homeless (Luke 2:7). He became a refugee whilst He was still an infant (Matthew 2:13-15). He lived in a foreign country and returned Israel to live in the despised city of Nazareth (Matthew 2:19-23). He was uneducated yet confounded the wisest teachers in the land when He was only 12 years old (See Luke 2:47). He had a manual job; He was a carpenter (Mark 6:3). The Person who created the worlds made tables and chairs. God's gift of His Son was the gift of coming into the world we occupied with all its joys and sorrow, its pain, poverty and suffering and its disease and death, its sinfulness and wickedness. The gift of God was to come where we were. It was to come where we were so that we could be where He is. But this coming down was not simply to experience humanity; it was to redeem. Jesus in his own words said, *"The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which is lost"* (Luke 19:10).

Of course, many people do not think of themselves as lost. But when we consider the extraordinary world that we live in and its extraordinary resources, and then look at the enormity of our moral, political, economic, environmental, military problems and then the idea of being lost is not difficult to understand.

Jesus came into the world to save. He did that by revealing the nature of God in His wonderful life then by laying that life down for us in death at the cross. He paid the price of our redemption by taking our place. God in the Person of His Son personally acts to meet the needs of humanity by His death and resurrection.

#### 4. God's perfect blessings

Our final heading is God's perfect blessings. "...that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, 'Abba, Father!'" (Galatians 4:5-6).

By faith in Christ we receive newness of life and the blessings associated with it. As Paul explains, we are redeemed, we have been adopted in Christ to become the sons of God. The proof of this is the Spirit of God dwelling in our hearts. Because we are now the sons of God, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts. The Holy Spirit is given by God the Father through the intercession of the Son (John 14:16) and is sent by the Son from the Father (John 15:26) and bears witness to the Son (John 15:26 and John 16:14). This is supported by the phrases,

- "the Spirit of Christ" (Romans 8:9);
- "the Spirit of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:19); and
- "the Spirit of Jesus" (Acts 16:7, English Standard Version).

"The Spirit in our hearts cries Abba Father" (Galatians 4:6). This is a strong cry which emphasises our relationship with the Father through Christ and the basis of our communion and prayers. "Abba" means "father" and the phrase shows the oneness of all believers in the family of God in the use of the Hebrew and Greek words for father.

This display of the grace of God is the means by which we are taken from all the distance of alienation from God to be brought into His family. Christ brought us into this new relationship with God the Father. His Spirit in our hearts is a witness to this relationship. We are saved and kept by the love of God; we live by faith in the Son of God and by the power of the Spirit of God; we possess eternal life and we have a hope in Christ of the eternal heaven.

This Christmas, countless gifts have been given and received. But the greatest gift of all, God's Son, is constantly refused.

As Christians let us reflect on the greatness of God's love towards us in His perfect timing, His perfect gift, His perfect salvation and His perfect blessing, and in response let God's love to us shine through our lives in the coming year so that we might lead others to the Saviour.

Thank you for listening to the *Truth for Today* talk, A Christmas message, "When the fullness of the time had come", (Galatians 4:1-7), talk number T1073.

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