

In the Fullness of Time

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Introduction.

- A. In all of the projects I've taken on since Lauren and I bought our house last year, there has been one constant: nothing has ever gone the way that I intended it to go. I don't consider myself a particularly incompetent person, but even the simplest projects take three times as long as I think they should.
- B. Our own failings in carrying out our plans should, if nothing else, create in us a greater appreciation for the way that God carried out His eternal purpose in sending His Son to save us. God planned it all before the foundation of the world and guided it through thousands of years of human history without a single hiccup.
- C. Much of the time, when we think of all that God had to do to carry this purpose forward, we think of big, spectacular things, like parting the Red Sea or raising Jesus from the dead. However, the wisdom of God was just as much responsible for its success as the power of God was. We see just one example of this wisdom cited in Galatians 4:4-5. Christ did not merely come to the people whom God had chosen, or at the place God had chosen, but in the time that God had chosen. God selected the precise moment at which Jesus should be born to give His plan the maximum chance of succeeding. Of course, we can't know the mind of God. We can't know every reason why God picked the time He did. However, as we study both the Bible and its historical context, we find in them a number of clues to the reasoning process of the Almighty. Let's look at some of these clues this evening, to uncover what it means that Jesus came in the fullness of time.

I. Historical and Political Reasons.

- A. The first and most obvious thing that made Jesus' birth "in the fullness of time" was the fact that it occurred when God said it was going to. We take this mainly from **THE DREAM OF THE GREAT STATUE** recorded in Daniel 2. Here are the high points of the text: One night, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar had a dream about a magnificent statue. Its head was of gold, its chest and arms were of silver, its belly and thighs were of bronze, its legs were of iron, and its feet were of iron and clay. In this dream, a stone cut without hands fell on the feet of the statue, crushing them and growing into a mountain that filled the whole earth.
- B. Of all the wise men of Babylon, only Daniel could explain the prophecy. He told the king that the different parts of the statue represented four great empires. The head of gold was the Nebuchadnezzar's own kingdom of Babylon. The chest and arms of silver were the kingdom to follow Nebuchadnezzar, which we can historically identify as the Medo-Persian Empire. The belly and thighs of bronze were the kingdom after that, which we know as Alexander the Great's Greek empire. The legs of iron and the feet of iron and clay were the fourth and final empire, which, historically, we know turned out to be the Roman Empire. The stone which crushed the feet of the statue was the kingdom of God, the kingdom headed by the ascended Christ. Christ, then, had to come to earth during the time of the Roman Empire in order to fulfill Daniel's prophecy.
- C. Of course, that only pushes the question back a level. Why then? The Scripture doesn't speak as clearly to this, but it's still possible to come up with some likely **HISTORICAL REASONS**. Look at this timeline with me, which ranges from 500 BC to 200 AD. Inside this historical span, we can logically pinpoint the time span before which Christ could not have come, and after which He could not have come either. The first of these two bookends was the final Messianic prophecy of the Old Testament, which we can pinpoint as occurring in about 420 BC. We find this prophecy in Malachi 3:1. This prophecy is clearly about Jesus. He is described as Lord and as the Messenger of the covenant. Obviously, Christ was not going to come to earth before God finished telling His people what to expect from Him. This is the earliest Christ could have come.
- D. The latest Christ could have come was about 70 AD. In 70 AD, a Roman army led by the future emperor Titus sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple for the final time. To this day, there is no Jewish temple in Jerusalem. Because various forms of temple worship were a big part of the Old Law, no Jew after 70 AD, no matter how much he wanted to, could keep that Law. That would have held true for Christ too, and if Christ couldn't keep the Law perfectly, He would no longer be an unblemished sacrifice for sin. Unless God wanted to really re-arrange human history, Christ had to come before 70. That gives us a window of opportunity for God, if you will, of about 500 years, from 420 BC to 70 AD, in which He could send Christ to earth.
- E. Now, of course, this 500-year window was not exactly a golden age of peace and harmony. In fact, almost until its very end, it was filled with conflict that would have hindered Christ's work. For instance, in approximately 330 BC, Alexander the Great marches down the east coast of the Mediterranean, throws out the Jews' old Persian overlords, and conquers them himself. Alexander dies, his generals start fighting each other, and by about 300 BC, Palestine ends up under the control of a group called the Ptolemaic Empire.
- F. There's a problem with this, though. The Ptolemaic Empire is centered in Egypt. Its bitter enemy, the Seleucid Empire, is centered in Syria, and so for the next 100 years, Palestine is nothing but a big battleground between these two kingdoms. That's bad for the Jews. What's worse for the Jews is that by about 200 AD,

the Seleucids win and conquer Palestine. The Seleucids and the Jews get on like cats and dogs. It all comes to a head in about 150 BC when the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes forcibly converts the Jerusalem temple into a temple of Zeus and sacrifices a pig on the altar. This is intolerable to the Jews, and they revolt in what is called the Maccabean rebellion. For the next hundred years, war continues throughout Palestine.

- G. All this comes to an end when one of the Jewish faction leaders gets the bright idea of inviting the Romans in to help him fight against the other Jewish factions. Of course, once invited in, the Romans don't go away. They conquer Palestine in about 60 BC. There's yet more instability throughout the country, and eventually, Herod the Great is given control of the area by the Romans in about 30 BC. Life is fairly peaceful under Herod, but Herod is a bloodthirsty, paranoid maniac who even on his deathbed was trying to have the baby Jesus killed. Obviously, it would not have been a good idea for Jesus to appear earlier. After the death of Herod in about 4 BC, though, for the next seventy years, there is peace in the region, and it is exactly at the beginning of this oasis of peace that Christ was born, so that His work would not be disrupted by conflict.
- H. In addition to this, there were also **POLITICAL REASONS** why it was advantageous for Christ to come when He did. At this point in time, for the first time in history, the whole Mediterranean basin was united under one government. This had a number of legal advantages, especially for the apostle Paul. Consider, for instance, the exchange recorded in Acts 22:25, 29. As this shows, because Paul was a Roman citizen, he had certain rights and protections that others did not, and he used those rights on several occasions during his work.
- I. On a larger scale, equally important was the relationship between the Romans and the Jews at this point in time. When Christ was born, the Jews were considered a favored minority within the Empire. They were allowed freedom to worship their God in peace, and they were not required to participate in the emperor worship that the Romans demanded from everyone else. We see this indifference to Jewish matters in Gallio's reply to the Jews about Paul in Acts 18:14-16. That's why we don't see persecution from the Romans in Acts or any of the other records of the early church. The Romans started out treating Christianity as just another kind of Judaism, and they only began persecuting the church when they realized it wasn't.

II. Practical and Moral Reasons.

- A. In addition to these, there were also a number of **PRACTICAL REASONS** why God sent Christ to earth when He did. Because of Alexander's conquests 300 years ago, Greek was spoken throughout the entire Mediterranean basin. Now, this didn't mean that Greek replaced Aramaic and all the other languages of the area. It did mean, though, that Greek was widely understood as a second language, in much the same way that English is spoken and understood throughout the world today. Educated people, city dwellers, and anyone who dealt much with foreigners spoke not just their native tongue, but also Greek.
- B. This wasn't particularly important for the apostles and other early Christians who had the gift of tongues. However, it was extremely important for those who didn't have that spiritual gift, and for the transmission of Scripture. The early letters written by the apostles were passed around like a cold in a kindergarten class. Consider, for instance, Paul's comments in Colossians 4:16. These letters were copied and transmitted with great speed, and because they were written in Greek, whoever got them could understand them.
- C. Similarly, the spread of the gospel was aided because transportation was better than at any point in the past. One factor in this was the presence of Roman roads throughout the empire. The Romans built hundreds of thousands of miles of roads. Originally, they did this so they could move troops swiftly through their dominions, but those roads worked just as well for merchants and just plain travelers like Paul.
- D. Another important factor was the absence of something we don't associate much with the ancient world: pirates. Here, of course, we refer not to "Pirates of the Caribbean," but to pirates of the eastern Mediterranean. A hundred years before the birth of Christ, pirates had overwhelmed the entire area. They strangled sea trade, and no one was safe from their depredations. Even Julius Caesar himself was once captured and held for ransom by pirates. Eventually, the Romans got so sick of it that they dispatched a general with a huge war fleet who cleaned out the pirates so thoroughly and bloodily that they never came back. As a result, sea travel throughout the Mediterranean became much safer. We see the importance of this when we consider that Luke records Paul traveling by sea no less than eleven different times.
- E. Finally, though, it is likely that **MORAL REASONS** caused God to send Jesus when He did. Consider, for instance, the words of Galatians 3:24. This tells us that one of the purposes of the Law was to morally prepare the Jews for the coming of Christ. It was to get them used to thinking about concepts like sin and holiness so that they would be equipped to understand Jesus and what Jesus was doing when He arrived. Jesus came only when enough of the Jews had reached the point where they could receive Him.
- F. We see the fruit of this tutoring by the Law in Luke 10:25-28. The scribe's reply here is very interesting. His answer, "Love God and love your neighbor," is not part of the Ten Commandments. It's not something that God explicitly pointed out and said, "This is the most important commandment." It's something that only people who studied the Law and thought about what it really meant would have come up with, and, as Jesus says, it was the right conclusion. Without that moral understanding, Jesus would have made no sense.

Conclusion. If you've come to the understanding that you need Jesus, seek Him and find Him tonight.