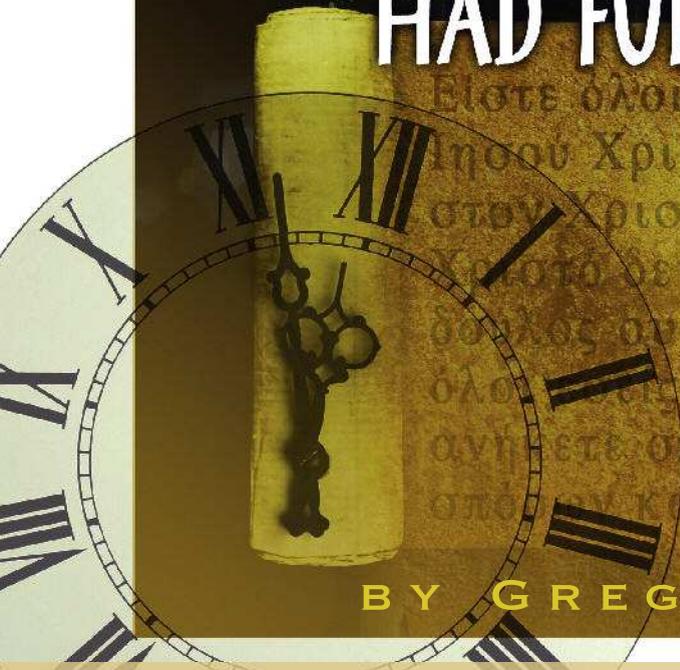


"WHEN THE TIME HAD FULLY COME..."



BY GREG ALBRECHT

*You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. But **when the time had fully come**, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.—Galatians 3:26-4:7*

Think back to your youth, perhaps a time when your mother and father promised to take you to the park, or on a picnic or to the circus. You couldn't wait for that time to come, could you? That's the way we were when we were kids—we drove our parents batty by continuously asking them, "Is it time yet?"

Then, when we were in grade school and high school, we asked a similar question every year, as the end of the school year approached. “Is school just about over? Is it time for summer vacation yet?”

Most of the time, when we were young, we were waiting for time to pass so that something else could happen. Have you ever asked a three or four-year-old their age? Be prepared for the most exacting math they are capable of. The youngest will normally pull themselves up to their full height and pronounce, “I am 4 and 11/12.” Just kidding, they’re not that exacting, but would be if they could.

Of course, later in life we don’t want to be 55½, or 68½. We don’t want our next birthday to be our 70th birthday. We want time to slow down.

Children of God

The passage above (Galatians 3:26-4:7) is all about being a child, and it’s all about growing up. It is all about spiritual rebirth, as well as spiritual adoption. It tells us what it means to be one of God’s children, and how we become a child of God.

This passage begins, in Galatians 3:26, with a discussion about faith in Christ Jesus and how that faith allows us to be baptized into and clothed with Christ.

This is not so much a passage about a specific external act of baptism, about how much water is used, about how old we must be, and all the other issues that are often discussed when



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water baptism is discussed. This is, instead, a passage about being completely covered, clothed and transformed by and into Christ, so that **what we were is no longer the issue**, in terms of our identity.

By faith in Christ we enter a new family, as Paul so powerfully and beautifully explains in verse 28. Paul is saying that God’s family transcends physical distinctions, for God’s family integrates all of our physical differences and distinctions so that his family includes rather than excludes. All are welcome. All are invited.

In verse 29 Paul links earlier discussions about what it meant to be a Jew, under

the law, and thus to have Abraham for a religious father. Paul says that those who are in Christ are actually spiritual heirs of Abraham, in the sense that they are heirs of the faith of Abraham. Abraham, as Paul eloquently explains in Romans chapter 4, was justified by God, not by his obedience, but by his faith.

The Bridge from Abraham to Jesus

Instead of seeing the Jew as the owner of the old covenant, and the gentile the owner of the new

covenant, Paul instead, through a Christ-centered perspective of the Old Testament, explains that the promises to Abraham are linked with the blessings we receive in Christ. Paul completely obliterates the argument that one must obey the old covenant rules in order to receive the promises given to Abraham by saying that those who accept Christ become the heirs of the promises to Abraham—for the spiritual significance of the promises to Abraham take precedence over any physical overtones.

So Paul moves the discussion from external human performance, from the idea that “if you keep the law then you will receive

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physical blessings” to the ultimate fulfillment of any and all promises, by the grace of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

As we continue reading in the initial verses of the fourth chapter of Galatians, Paul continues to explain what it means to be a child of God. The Galatians had been indoctrinated with the false teaching of the legalistic Judaizers, who told them that their faith was useless unless they earned God’s good graces by virtue of their obedience to the old covenant.

Grace was not enough, said these religious legalists. You have to show God why you’re worthy—you have to demonstrate to him why he should love you—you have to contribute to your salvation.

All in the Family

To combat this heretical, religious counterfeit, this monstrous lie that completely devalues God’s grace, Paul employs the word pictures of sons and heirs, and then more fully develops these word pictures or metaphors. He says that while we are God’s children, we are not his children in the sense of being immature babes who cannot function. If that’s the case, then as children in God’s household we would be no different than slaves.

What Paul is talking about is the transformation that God effects, turning us into mature Christians in Christ, and as a result, full heirs of the promises of God, given to us by his grace. The world to



IT IS ALL ABOUT SPIRITUAL RE-BIRTH, AS WELL AS SPIRITUAL ADOPTION... BY FAITH IN CHRIST WE ENTER A NEW FAMILY...

which Paul originally wrote had several different customs about passing from childhood to manhood.

In Judaism, a boy passed into full adulthood shortly after his 12th birthday.

In Roman society, the father decided when the child would become an adult. Every year, on March 17, a festival was held, and if the father felt the child was ready, the child would be formally adopted by his father as his acknowledged son and heir.

When the father adopted his child, the child was considered to have come of age. The now formally adopted child, heir of the father’s wealth, would receive new clothes (it is interesting that Paul often speaks of an adopted Christian as being clothed in Christ, using that very terminology in Galatians 3:26).

In the Greek world, a minor came of age at about 18 years.

In light of these customs, Paul pictures a small child who is the heir of a big estate. As

long as he is a child and has not been adopted by his father, he is no different from a slave. He has no freedom. He has no inheritance. Paul says that this was everyone’s condition, in terms of their relationship with God, before Jesus came to earth. Before Christmas, that was our spiritual state. Before Christ we were slaves to the *basic principles of this world*.

Religious Principles

Paul uses the word *principles* in Galatians 4:3, and in 4:9, as well

as in Colossians 2:20, to describe the rituals, ceremonies, obligations and duties that legalistic religion says we must obey in order for God to love us. Principles of religion are all about what we can see, touch and feel. When we are in Christ, he transforms us from the inside out, externals no longer control us. We are not slaves—we are free.

A child is subject to principles, and according to the analogy, rightly so, for they have not been accepted by society or by their parents as full adults. Apart from Christ, that’s a perfect picture of our spiritual condition. Apart from Christ, we would still be under the control of taskmasters. Apart from Christ, we would still be no different than slaves. Apart from Christ, we would have no rights, no freedoms, no inheritance.

And now we come to Galatians 4:4, a verse that speaks of the birth of Jesus as happening **When the Time Had Fully Come**.

It was that time when the Father said, "It's time. It's time for me to offer my children their inheritance. It's time for my children to stop being children, and to become full heirs of my kingdom, to receive the full privileges of my family."

It was the perfect time for the arrival of Jesus in terms of cultural and historical conditions. The world was united under Roman rule, experiencing pax Romana, the peace of Rome, a "peace" that

The common language then was Greek, which encouraged communication and proved to be a great advantage to the proclamation of the gospel.

Verse 5 tells us the purpose behind this intricate divine planning, the purpose for which **the time had fully come**.

God intervened in history to change our relationship with him. He intervened in history, coming to us in the flesh in the person of Jesus, so that he could redeem us, purchasing

But Wait Just a Minute!

Let's step back—and ask a few questions: The perfect time? Everything was just right? This was the idyllic intersection of time and eternity? How could Paul have said that?

1) Mary became pregnant before she was married. So Mary and Joseph had to deal with the consequences of Mary being a pregnant, unmarried (at the time of conception at least) teenage mother. How did their families and friends react? What kind of ugly rumors and gossip floated around the neighborhood?

These are hardly optimal circumstances upon which to begin a marriage—God chose these kinds of circumstances? This was a good time?

2) Then there was the difficult journey from Nazareth

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ROMAN ROADS LINED THE EMPIRE... WHICH THE APOSTLES OF JESUS LATER USED TO PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL THROUGHOUT THE EMPIRE... THE COMMON LANGUAGE THEN WAS GREEK... A GREAT ADVANTAGE TO THE PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL.

resulted from the military superiority of the Roman legions. Rome had done so much more to make this the perfect intersection of time and eternity. Roman roads lined the empire, enhancing travel and commerce—roads which the apostles of Jesus later used to proclaim the gospel throughout the empire.

The world generally spoke a common language, as it does today. Today the most common language is English.

our freedom from slavery to the law.

The time had fully come to release the gates of religious prisons, to offer freedom in Christ to everyone in bondage to religious principles, laws and servitude.

The time had fully come to change, once and for all, the terms of human relationship with God, from law to grace. Everything had come together in a perfect way in God's plan of salvation for the birth of Jesus.

to Bethlehem, for both Mary and Joseph. They undertook this journey when Mary was about ready to give birth. It was a necessary trip because they had to pay taxes and take part in a census. How did God decide this was a perfect plan?

3) There was no place to stay in the inn, so Mary had to give birth in a stable, with the sights, sounds and smells of animals very much a part of the environment that welcomed the King of kings

and Lord of lords into this world. This was the best that God could arrange? How was that perfect planning?

4) When Herod found out that the King of the Jews was about to be born, he issued a decree that all baby boys in Bethlehem, two years and younger, must be killed. Mary, Joseph and Jesus had to become refugees in Egypt until the bloodletting subsided. If you were a father or mother living in Bethlehem at that time, with a baby boy under two years of age, you wouldn't think of this as when **the time had fully come**, would you?

Paul didn't say **the time had fully come** so that everything would be comfortable and convenient. It wasn't comfortable, snugly, cozy and perfect then—at the first Christmas—and it isn't now.

A "Perfect" Christmas?

You may find yourself in a similar kind of place right now. Things are not going well. You or a loved one may have serious health problems. You may have worries about money. You may have family problems, loved ones are not talking to you because they're upset with you.

And now, it's Christmas time. Oh, great—now when you read magazines and watch television, you're reading about and watching "perfect" families, well-clothed, healthy, in big, warm houses, sitting by nice roaring fireplaces, with new cars parked in the

IF YOU WERE A FATHER OR MOTHER LIVING IN BETHLEHEM AT THAT TIME, WITH A BABY BOY UNDER TWO YEARS OF AGE, YOU WOULDN'T THINK OF THIS AS WHEN *THE TIME HAD FULLY COME*, WOULD YOU? ... THEIR FAMILIES' "CHRISTMAS PRESENT" FROM HEROD WAS THE MURDER OF THEIR BABY BOY.



JESUS CAME TO GIVE THE WHOLE WORLD ETERNAL LIFE... GREATER THAN THE PHYSICAL LIVES THOSE BOYS WOULD HAVE LIVED HAD KING HEROD NOT KILLED THEM. JESUS CAME TO GIVE US A TRANSFORMED LIFE, AN ETERNAL LIFE THAT HE LIVES IN US.

driveway, happy, obedient, well-mannered children running around—you think what a loser you must be, because these images are not even close to the reality of your life as Christmas approaches.

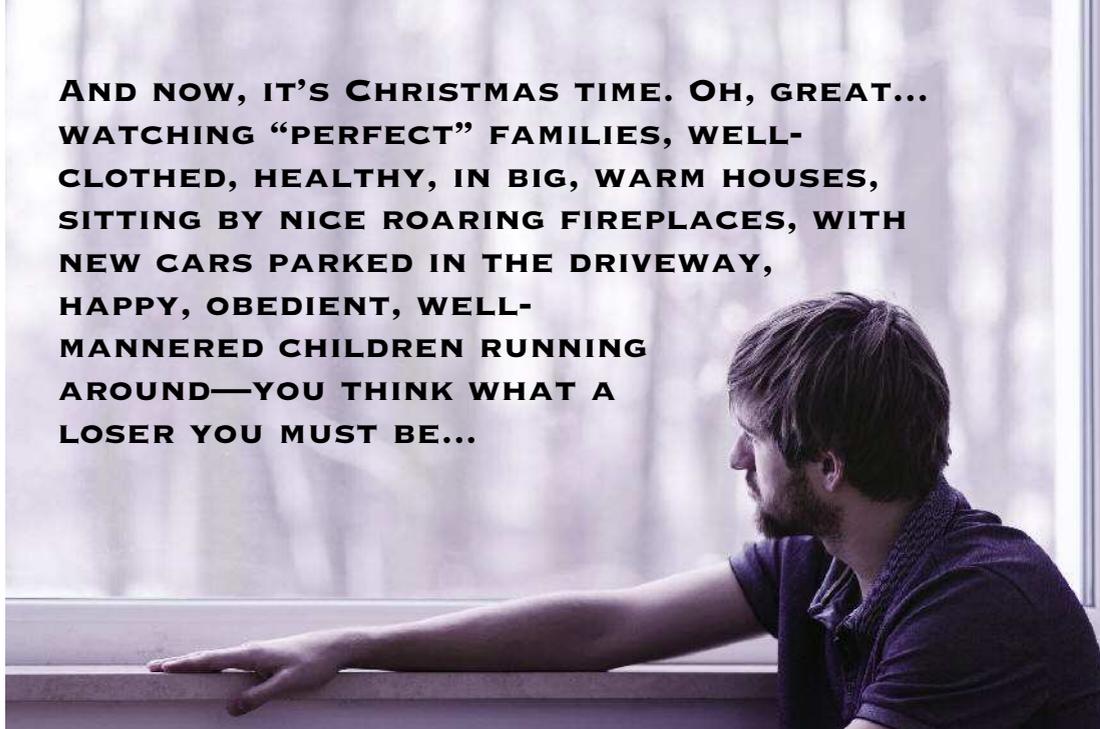
Let's think back to those baby boys in Bethlehem, the ones who were two years old and under who were killed by Herod because Jesus was born. Their families' "Christmas

present" from Herod was the murder of their baby boy. Are you worried about what you are you going to "get" for Christmas?

Think about what those families received—the death and funeral of a little infant. How tragic and heartbreaking is that? This was **the time that had fully come**?

Such things seem unfair to us, but let's turn it around, and

AND NOW, IT'S CHRISTMAS TIME. OH, GREAT... WATCHING "PERFECT" FAMILIES, WELL-CLOTHED, HEALTHY, IN BIG, WARM HOUSES, SITTING BY NICE ROARING FIREPLACES, WITH NEW CARS PARKED IN THE DRIVEWAY, HAPPY, OBEDIENT, WELL-MANNERED CHILDREN RUNNING AROUND—YOU THINK WHAT A LOSER YOU MUST BE...



full rights as heirs of his kingdom. We are now part of his kingdom, even now as we live in our mortal, fleshly bodies. We will inherit God's complete, eternal, spiritual kingdom when Jesus comes again and our bodies are glorified and made immortal. We will live in him and with him forever and ever.

look at it from God's perspective.

The baby boys in Bethlehem did not die in order to save Jesus. They didn't give their blood so that he could escape to exile in Egypt. It was precisely the opposite.

Why Jesus Came

Jesus came, as Galatians 4:5 says, *to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.*

Jesus came so that we might pass from legalistic religion to loving relationship.

Jesus came to free us from our spiritual prisons.

Jesus came to offer us new life, eternal life, to redeem us from the drudgery and bondage of a religious grind, where we endlessly toil in the fields of religious authoritarian slave-drivers, attempting, by the sweat of our brows, to please and appease God.

Jesus came so that we would pass from being cradled in the arms of our physical mothers to being cradled in the arms of God.

Jesus came to give the whole world eternal life, greater than

the physical life its inhabitants would eventually lose, greater than the physical lives those boys would have lived had King Herod not killed them.

Jesus came to give us a transformed life, an eternal life that he lives in us. He redeemed us that we might become sons of God, no longer slaves, so that the eternal life

BECAUSE JESUS CAME AT JUST THE RIGHT TIME—IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME, WHEN THE TIME HAD FULLY COME—WE ARE GOD'S HEIRS, THE FULLY ADOPTED CHILDREN OF PRIVILEGE AND FAVOR, FULL PARTICIPANTS IN HIS ETERNAL KINGDOM.

he gives us cannot be cut down by some brutal tyrant or maniacal killer.

We are heirs of the kingdom, by his grace, and our eternal life cannot be terminated by cancer or by a drunken driver! We are heirs—God will wipe away our tears, so that we will no longer experience pain, mourning, crying or death (Revelation 21:4).

God has adopted us because of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. God has given us

Because Jesus came at just the right time—in the fullness of time, **When the Time Had Fully Come**—we are God's heirs, the fully adopted children of privilege and favor, full participants in his eternal kingdom.

The story of Christmas is God the Father saying to God the Son and God the Holy

Spirit—"It's time. It's not just the right time in society, culture and history, it's more than that. **The time has fully come** to do all that needs to be done to make ready the wedding banquet, to send out the invitation, to set my children free from religious bondage and obligation. It's time for all humanity to receive my invitation to become fully-fledged children of my kingdom, children of my inheritance." □