

The Fullness of Time

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Preacher: Canon Dr. J.I. Packer

[0 : 0 0] guide us now father we pray as we turn to your word send the spirit into our hearts to give us light understanding and wisdom and so may your word be a blessing to our souls this morning for Jesus sake amen you know how we use the phrase the big picture we use it to recall conversation partners to what the details are all about when we fear that our conversation partners have as we say lost sight of the wood among the trees or lost sight of the forest among the trees is the way that some people prefer to say it you can lose the design among the details and we recall people to the big picture when we think that that's actually what's happened to them and you know how it is in an art gallery if you're to appreciate all those pictures that are there on display you have to find the viewing distance for each of them don't stand too close to the canvas or quite strictly you won't be able to quite precisely you won't be able to see what you're looking at and last Sunday from this pulpit

I ventured to say that you can't beat the prayer book for understanding and today we are going to dig into the epistle and gospel for the sunset for the for the Sunday after Christmas and what I'm going to suggest to you is that there we have straightforwardly presented to us the big picture which we need to see if we're to appreciate Christmas season that we're just going through there's a plan involved there's what we might call God's world view as part of the story and it's on the plan that I want us to focus for a moment because it's on the plan that

Paul is shining the light in that first paragraph of Galatians chapter 4 which was set as our epistle actually it's a paragraph in the middle of a bigger picture than we can look at now because Paul is in the middle of explaining how the doctrine of justification by faith fits into all that has preceded it in connection with Israel and the law and the figure of Abraham at the back of all that well we have to leave that we pick up where the epistle picks up indeed we pick up halfway through the epistle there's limits to what one can do in 10 or 15 minutes so look at the second half of the epistles starting at verse 4 and let me underline the four key realities that are being presented to us in verses 4 through 7 first you have the occasion that's the moment for action and that is pointed to directly by the phrase the fullness of time when the fullness of time had come are the words that begin verse 4 and this phrase alerts us to the fact that as I said

God has a plan a plan of world history history history is indeed as we preachers love to say or this preacher anyway loves to say his story as it is he is the lord of history he is managing time and here we are being asked to focus on something that took place on an occasion that he had planned when in a real sense the fullness of time had come a momentous moment had dawned and well this is this is how we are to understand the way things were when Jesus was born the world was one world it was the Roman

Empire the Roman Empire was honeycombed by Roman roads so the communication from one end of the empire to the other was easy Roman legions were deployed in various places round the Mediterranean and through Asia Minor into Western Asia to keep the peace so it was a situation a world situation in which news could travel without interruption and that in fact is what happened following the coming and the ministry of Jesus the gospel did go round the then known world and within a century or century and a half anyway there were churches everywhere in the Roman Empire it was a time of very rapid

[7 : 0 3] Christian expansion well yes God had planned it that way Jesus came in the fullness of time then the second thing which we should notice is the action which took place when the moment for action had come it's in the second half of verse four God sent forth his son incarnation was the action without ceasing to be divine the son of God became human was born as a human baby became in fact a Jew a member of God's covenant people whose history goes back to

Abram and is all recorded for us in the Old Testament we think of the Old Testament as a prophetic collection of material yes the material itself took well over a thousand years to collect but it's all prophetic all looking forward one way or another to the fullness of time when the son of God would come as the Christ the Messiah the Savior the new focus of a new human race so from the Jews the people of promise there emerges the Savior of the world that's the action that God took in art books where classical paintings are reproduced you often find on the page where a big picture has been presented a little picture which is labeled a detail of the picture which fills the page and we should think of think today of that section of Matthew chapter 1 which was read to us as our gospel as a detail from the plan of

God which was fulfilled in the fullness of time just for a moment the focus was fixed on Joseph Joseph the just and honorable man who found his fiancée pregnant and at first didn't know what to do about it but was told by an angel in a dream what was going on the pregnancy was from the Holy Spirit the child to be born would be a male he would save his people from their sins so Joseph was to give him the name Jesus yes that's the detail and that's how we heard it and that's what we rejoice at specifically over Christmas but yet we don't appreciate

Christmas properly until we see it as a central detail in the grand plan of history and that takes us on to the third point the intention the intention of God in the action that he took in the fullness of time verse five makes that clear God sent forth his son born of woman born under the law born a Jew to redeem those who lived who were under the law for the moment Paul is thinking of himself and his fellow Jews in a moment he'll be thinking of the and speaking of the Gentiles as well who were all involved in this world transforming event that took place the first

Christmas tide God sent forth his son to redeem those who were under the law that word redeem points to purchase it's a commercial word in the Greek to purchases out of bondage out of slavery out of imprisonment under evil forces the son of God became man in order to do that that's what the notion of redeem essentially is it's the thought of paying a price for someone else's freedom and that is what our savior came to do never think of

[12:50] Christmas never rejoice in Christmas without letting your mind move forward to Calvary to the redemption the momentous achievement for which the savior came and that takes us to the fourth thing that Paul sets before us and that is what I call the intention that is God's intention what it was all in aid of what the plan had as its goal Paul enlarges on that end of verse five that we might receive adoption as sons now to understand this properly we have to remember or to know how adoption was managed in the ancient

Roman ancient Roman imperial world we are used to the adopting of infants that wasn't the routine then then adoption was practiced by childless men who wanted an heir a son a worthy person to carry on the family name to administer the family estate to sustain the family reputation and to honor the family as such so what he did again and again it was a standard practice in the Roman culture he would look around for a young man of blameless character distinction handsome see and skillful and all those good things and he would adopt him usually at the age of about twenty but not always

I mean not always did they adopt a young man from the community who was already a person of distinction it was known that a childless man needing an heir might on occasion adopt as his son someone who previously had been his bondservant slave the indentured slave in his family he the childless man had had all the opportunity he could wish to observe this young man and see his quality and so every now and then it was someone who had been a slave who became the adopted son and heir of the rich man the property owner who previously had been his master and whom he previously hadn't been able to think of at all as someone with whom he could be close but then he's adopted as the rich man's son a close fellowship begins

Christ says Paul redeemed us who were under the law condemned by the law so that we might receive adoption as sons and he goes on to say in verse six and seven because you are sons God has sent the spirit of his son into our hearts you notice that Paul now is bringing in all believers Gentiles along with Jews our hearts he says he sent the spirit of his son into our hearts crying Abba father what that means brothers and sisters is that you and I who have faith in Christ and whose hearts have been made new by the Holy Spirit because we're believers we have what older writers and teachers used to call a filial instinct now built into us that is to say it's natural to us there's a kind of inner urge to rely on

God God the creator as our heavenly father to live out the adoption in other words to practice the relationship and not be in any doubt about it and if we are all Christians together this morning well you understand from your own experience what it is that I'm saying here it isn't just that the Lord Jesus teaches us to pray to God as our father it's that we feel it's natural and right and we have an instinct then to do it and that's what Paul is referring to when he speaks of the coming of the spirit of God into our hearts as prompting the cry Abba father so you're no longer a slave but a son says [18 : 52] Paul and if a son then you're an heir through Christ and the real conclusion of the plan is that we the adopted sons should inherit as Paul says in another place we are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ well it's terrific it's momentous it takes it should take our breath away and if we think about it it surely will so I'm going to suggest that there are a couple of questions that we should be asking ourselves as we survey these things the occasion the action the intention and the conclusion of the plan of

God question number one do we really appreciate the Christmas that we celebrate the world around us doesn't the world around us isolates Christmas as an event on December 25th each year from the plan of God of which Christmas is a central part and so we have to say the world doesn't understand Christmas the world doesn't appreciate Christmas and we Christians have to be careful that we don't go the way of the world and forget what it's all about ourselves we only appreciate the Christmas we celebrate if we have learned as we learn actually from this account of the plan of God if we learn to look back back to eternity when God formed the plan of redemption which has yes the birth of Jesus and the death of Jesus followed by the resurrection of Jesus at its heart moon only if we've learned you see to see Christmas as part of that glorious plan which means salvation for us only if we've learned to look up and remember that Jesus born as a baby in Jerusalem sorry Bethlehem what am I talking about long ago Jesus is on the throne now and by his spirit he who lives and reigns, shall I say up there, is also with us every moment of our lives down here. And then we must have learned also, as Paul's words teach us to do directly, learned to look forward and appreciate the hope that is ours as God's adopted children.

We are sons of God with Jesus our elder brother. We are heirs of God with Jesus. Heirs of glory. [22 : 34] We have a hope that no one can take from us. We have a hope which the world needs and hasn't got. That's the tragedy of the world today. But if we appreciate these things, well then we appreciate the Christmas we celebrate.

And I trust that at this season we do. And just as a tailpiece to that, let me say, do we really understand how bold we are being when we wish each other, as we're going to do over these next few days, a happy new year?

The world isn't a happy place and is getting less and less happy than it was. Yes, all sorts of things are going wrong around us.

Politics are dicey. Economics are dicier. And I was watching a television program last night in which a man spent time cheerfully affirming that the world's glaciers are irretrievably melting so that by the end of this century, the sea will be two or three meters higher than it is at the moment.

And that will mean that all coastlines and all people who live by the coast are going to be in trouble.

[24 : 19] Like people on television are, I suppose, paid to be. He was cheerful about it. I couldn't be cheerful about it. And I don't imagine that anyone else who saw the program would be cheerful about it either.

Yes, but our hope is beyond this world. We are joint heirs with Christ. And with that in mind, yes, let us wish each other a truly happy new year and remember as we live our lives that every day is one day nearer.

This is glory. Glory through Christmas. Glory through the plan of God. Glory through the grace of God. Praise his name.

Amen.