

"The Fullness of Time: A Christmas Meditation."

We all have our favorite Bible passages that we remember during the holiday time. Some of us will read the story of Jesus' birth as written by Luke. We will imagine the shepherds seeing angelic choirs. We can visualize Mary and Joseph next to a manger in which the new born King sleeps. Some of us will read the prophecies of Isaiah or listen to the Scripture passages that make up the text of Handel's Messiah.

One of my favorite Christmas texts is Galatians 4:4-5. *"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."* These short verses are packed with truth: Jesus is God's Son; the incarnation; the humiliation of the Christ; the mission of the Christ to redeem sinners; even the doctrine of adoption is referenced. However, the part of this text that holds my attention is the opening statement that Christ came into the world *"when the fullness of time had come."*

Some people may read those words and imagine that God was watching the course of history, and when He judged that the time was right He began to execute the work of salvation. But there is something lacking in that interpretation. It pictures God as passively watching events unfold. This falls far short of the Biblical view of God.

No, the phrase "...fullness of time..." implies much more than the time was right for God to act. The phrase implies a ripening, a purpose and a decree that was proceeding toward fulfillment. God was not standing aside history, observing events and deciding that the time was right. God was in complete control of history. It was proceeding as He had decreed and now the time had come when He had ordained the incarnation of the Son to accomplish His work of salvation.

God had controlled the march of the empires. Much of the middle eastern world had been united under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. The Babylonian empire was expanded under the Medes and Persians. Cyrus the Mede had released the Jews from their captivity and allowed them to return to Israel. The Greeks had given the world a common language and a civilization that was rich in learning. The Romans had come to expand the empire, bring Roman order and a transportation system that enabled freedom of movement and commerce. All of these things were necessary in order for the Son to come into the world, accomplish His work and for the gospel to be proclaimed throughout the world. This did not happen by chance. Rather it happened just as God intended. Moreover, God had already revealed that this was going to be the course of history. Daniel 2:29-45 portrays the flow of nations and empires that reach their fullness when God sent His Son to establish a new kingdom that would never end. This was the fullness of time.