

# In the Fullness of Time

The sole Gentile gospel writer, Luke, records that on the night of Jesus' birth an angel appeared



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to shepherds in the sheep pastures outside Bethlehem announcing: "Do not be afraid; for behold I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all the people: for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11). The pioneer missionary Paul presents this dramatic message of hope for all the world, using an image familiar to both the Jewish and Gentile world. On this fourth Sunday of Advent we focus on the grace of God offered to all people through which we become God's children.

God's purpose from the beginning has been to work through his chosen people to tell the world of his love. As the early church began to spread across the Roman Empire, the first two prominent churches were located in Jerusalem and Syrian Antioch. At first the major influence in missionary activity came from the mother church in Jerusalem, wanting Gentile converts to observe the rituals and teachings of traditional Judaism. Paul was uniquely qualified to reach out to both factions as he traveled outside Judah because, although he was Jewish, he was also a Roman citizen. Paul, who had grown up in the prominent pagan city of Tarsus, had become part of the strictest sect of Judaism, a Pharisee dedicated to the study and keeping of Jewish Law. (Read how Paul came to see his devotion to legalistic religion as inferior to faith in Christ in Philippians 3:1-14.)

Because Paul recognized he would not be able to return to the region of Galatia anytime soon, he wrote them an encouraging and instructive letter around 48 AD, so they would be able to sort out the conflicting advice of some Judaizers.

Paul understood the idea of

becoming a "legal heir" in both Roman and Jewish culture. In the Roman world a father had absolute power over a son, setting the date at which that son could receive his inheritance as well as the power to appoint a trustee to control the son's inheritance. In other words, a son could be wealthy but might not be able to control that wealth until a specified time. And, in Jewish culture a son was considered a child until the first sabbath after this twelfth birthday, when his father would take his son to synagogue for *bar mitzvah* (son of the commandment).

This is why Paul describes us all as "heirs" who are only spiritual "minors, no better than slaves, though they are owners of all the property, but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father" (vv. 1-2). Whether Gentile or Jew, none of us have true spiritual standing or hope, that is, "while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world" (v. 3).

Then comes the word of hope: "*But when the fullness of time had come ...* God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children" (v. 5). In that day slaves outnumbered free persons by three to one in the Roman Empire; even the majority of those who were free lived in poverty. There were isolated instances of a person of wealth who had no natural heir adopting a slave who would have full benefit of inheritance laws. But those were instances as rare as someone in our day winning a six million dollar lottery. Connect that with the idea that in a world of inequality and hopelessness the Eternal God sent his only begotten Son into the world so we can all have the opportunity to become God's children, heirs of eternal life! That is exactly what Paul is saying: "God sent his Son ... to redeem those under the law ... that we might receive adoption as children ... because you are children, God has

## Formations

December 23, 2018

Scripture: Galatians 4:1-7

sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba! Father!'" (vv. 5-6).

The Christmas message is all about love, forgiveness and a new identity shaped by the grace of God. The idea of earning eternal life, figuring out the riddle that unlocks the secret entry into God's realm, or winning some kind of spiritual lottery is absurd.

Pay attention to life. There are challenges, tragedies, unexplainable variables, failed philosophies and shallow mysticism. Then comes the birth of a child to an obscure peasant family in a little-known Jewish village. Almost no one took notice, except some forgettable shepherds, a few strange stargazers from somewhere in the east, and – oh yes – those angels in the night sky. Of course there was a star, but the world was in such a mess no one looked up very much anymore. But a Jew from Tarsus, zealous for his exclusive religion, encountered that baby who became the resurrected Christ, on the road to Damascus, and that Pharisee became a powerful spokesman for that Jesus. That Pharisee renamed Paul described Jesus' birth as "when the fullness of time had come."

Our day is remarkably like the time when Jesus was born. We have a plurality of religions. Inequality and poverty shape society, fill our newscasts and challenge all who claim to believe in God. The sentimental picture of a baby in a Bethlehem manger is sweet. But that scene is inadequate without an honest examination of how that birth impacts your life. "The fullness of time" means that only in Christ is there hope for change, for overcoming the inequality, suffering and deceptions of our society. Paul writes that it is only when "the Spirit of his Son" is in our hearts that we can cry out "Abba! Father!" In that "fullness of time" you become God's child and an heir to God's blessed kingdom.

*Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.*