

The Right Time

December 3, 2017

Various texts

We come this morning to the beginning of our Christmas series. As some of you might know, preaching familiar texts/stories is one of the hardest things for me to do. How can you bring something new and fresh to the birth of Christ? Do they not know the story? Do they not understand how and why it took place? How can I keep your attention?

In response to that, I try to take a different approach each year. This year, I have chosen the perspective of the uniqueness of the event, particularly how it fit precisely into a grander plan than could not have been made up by man, or made to fit by people waiting for it. In other words, the way in which our Savior was born displays a well-orchestrated pattern that could only have come from the mind and will of One supernatural, sovereign, Supreme Being: The LORD God Himself. It was His plan, executed flawlessly.

I use as our launching place the theme verse not only for the whole series, but also for today's message. The verse is Galatians 4:4, "But when the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under law..." I zero in on the phrase, "time had fully come." I take that to point us to a plan, a grand plan, a perfect plan. The coming of Christ was not random, not an accident, not a fable, not a situation where people just got carried away and made things fit an expectation. No, the coming of Christ happened at the fullness of time, meaning precisely as planned by Sovereign God. It happened at precisely the perfect time, precisely the perfect place, among precisely the perfect people, for precisely the perfect reason, in the precisely perfect way. In other words, in this series I seek to examine how this event perfectly fits into the grand plan of God.

And today, we consider timing. The timing of the coming of Christ was perfect. He came at the fullness of time. What does that mean? In what ways was that particular day or month or year perfect? As I have pondered that question, I was led in 3 different directions, 3 different ways to answer that. As

you might suspect, those will be how I organize this message. The coming of Christ was timed perfectly: perfectly theologically, perfectly as predicted, and perfectly in the center of the whole course of human history.

So, as we get started, I ask you to join me as we contemplate the perfection of God's plan in the sending of His Son, an event we celebrate as Christmas.

I. The coming of Christ was perfectly timed theologically.

I begin here even though it might be a bit tricky to comprehend. Let me say it this way. We all know that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior. Right? What does that mean? It means the Rescuer. Jesus is the chosen one, the anointed one, the "Messiah-ed" One sent to save His people from their sins. Right?

So, if you are going to be a Messiah, it must mean that the people need saving. In other words, there needs to be a sense of need for rescue. Let me illustrate. I shared this with our college group this week. I got my start in pastoral ministry as a Jr. High pastor in the wealthy northern suburbs of Chicago. Before I got to that point, I led a youth ministry in rural Wisconsin. I found the two experiences to be worlds apart. I found ministry to wealthy suburban junior higher's to be about the most difficult challenge I had ever taken on. Why?

Because they needed nothing. They had everything they needed, and wanted, and dreamed. Their parents bought them everything they

asked for. Therefore, they had no need for Jesus. They didn't see themselves as needing saving. Saving from what? They were "perfect" children leading "perfect" lives. The only need to be saved that I remember was the time we went on a summer week long retreat and one of them got homesick and started calling Mom, who gave in and announced to him and to me that she was coming to get him, to "save him" from the misery of our event. I pleaded with her not to do it, that it wouldn't help her son and would set herself up for more such problems down the line, and would completely change our event. But she didn't listen. Sure enough, once the other kids found out they could call home and convince their parents to come get them, our mission was over. We were done. Again, who needs a Savior when you have Mom?

So, it is significant that God sent His Son when we needed Him most. Romans 5:6-8 puts it this way, "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

There it is, theologically Christ came to save us at precisely the right point, while we were sinners, at the point when we would recognize our need for a Messiah, a promised One who came to save.

So, with that in mind, when should God send a Messiah? When the people knew best that they needed saving. What was their situation some 2,000 years ago? Except for the select few pompous religious zealots, the people knew they needed saving. They may have been confused about saving from what? Romans? But the need for a Savior was high. After all, the birth happened while Mary and Joseph had to leave home by government order.

The OT can be viewed as a whole series of cycles in this regard. Peace, complacency, oppression, crying out, rescue, revival, peace, complacency, oppression, etc. This is the whole structure of the book

of Judges: the people are oppressed, they cry out to God, He sends a judge to save them, they live in peace, they forget about God, they become oppressed, they cry out to God, God sends a deliverer, they are rescued, revival, etc.

So what about their situation stands out 2,000 years ago. Where were they in the cycle? Well, they had been sent away into captivity in Assyria and Babylon. They had returned, even rebuilt the temple. But there were no prophets like Isaiah or Elijah. There were no strong religious leaders, not only no godly kings, but no kings at all. We actually even today call them the “silent years.” For over 400 years, it appeared that God was silent toward them. They were stuck. Like Job, they were simply sitting on their ash heap night and day, lamenting the condition. And during that time, on the world stage, one oppressor was being conquered by another, who was then conquered by another (just as was predicted in Daniel 2, more later) with the latest being the mighty Roman empire, under the oppressive hand of the Caesars. There seemed to be no escape from the real threat from the Romans. No, the people of that day were keenly aware of their need to be saved. They knew they needed a Messiah. Things were NOT going well. There was no one among them who could save them. God was going to have to send one...as He had promised.

The people of Israel, God’s chosen people were suffering, and were crying out to God. They knew their only hope was if their God would send forth a Savior. Theologically, the timing was perfect.

II. Prophetically, the timing was perfect.

The sense, the expectation of the coming of a Savior was strong in the days leading up to the birth of Jesus, not only because the need for one was clear, but because such a Savior had been promised. This is where we must remember the

Bible's perspective on human history. Other faiths and traditions have a fatalistic view of human history, that things are just playing out without any control. Stuff happens and we react. It is fate. This is the dominant view of our age. Others have a circular view, such as those who believe in reincarnation. You die and become something else. So, history then is a recording of this series of circles.

But the Bible presents history as linear, with a beginning and an end, with milestones along the way, all under the care and control of Almighty God. In fact, the uniqueness of the Bible's perspective on history is its insistence on declaring ahead of time what is going happen at particular points in that history. This is the prophetic voice of Scripture. It announces ahead of time what will happen in the future. We saw that a lot in our study of Isaiah. The Messiah was coming, born of a virgin (7:14), emerging from Galilee of the Gentiles (9:1), with a forerunner who would precede Him (Is. 40), a man of sorrows who would be despised and rejected (Isaiah 53). There are many, many more, but I think you get the point. From Genesis 3 to Malachi 4 there are thousands of predictions about the future coming of the Messiah. There was coming a central event that would change and set the course for all of human history.

But what about the specific timing of the event? Was that predicted? I invite you to turn to the book of Daniel. The book of Daniel was written about 500 years before the birth of Jesus. And you might say it is quite specific. Daniel 9 presents a timeline for the coming of the Messiah that is precise. In fact, it is so precise and so remarkable in what it predicts that many have concluded it must have been written AFTER the coming of Christ. But archeology has shown us that this cannot be the case, because we have in the Dead Sea scrolls evidence of the existence and impact of the book of Daniel that ALSO predates the birth of Jesus by over 100 years. In other words, we know Daniel was written when it claims to have been written. There is hard, archeological evidence. That evidence is on display for all to see. I have seen the physical evidence with my own eyes in the British museum in London. So as I present the content, know there is real evidence that this was written 500 years BEFORE Jesus.

Daniel 9 lays out a vision for the future that is written in the prophetic form of the day, using the term “weeks” to stand for 7 years. Think of it as a week’s worth of years. So the key to the prophecy is each week represents 7 years. With that in mind, I pick up the text at Daniel 9:25, “Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler comes, there will be seven sevens, and sixty-two sevens.” Is this specific enough for you? From this precise event, a decree from a pagan king, fast forward 490 years and this will be the coming of the Messiah. I don’t know about you, but I see this as quite specific. The text goes on from there to other events which are equally important and intriguing, but I want you to focus on this one. Daniel set down in writing a marker, a prediction of precisely when the Anointed One (or Messiah, or Christ, same word) would come.

And He came, “in the fullness of time.” Exactly 490 years later. Coincidence? Accident? Man’s manipulation of events? Not a chance! It was the plan of God.

III. From the perspective of human history? The center.

This one is a bit harder. Why? Because we can only know if it is the center if we know where each end is. And since we are still living after the center but before the end, how can we know how long it will be until the end? That is why I am warning you up front that I can’t know this for sure. I am not a prophet. I can’t tell you when this age will end. But there are clues....

My point here is that the coming of the Messiah was designed to be in the center of human history. It was not designed to be at the beginning, nor at the end, but at the center.

I invite you to turn back to the book of Daniel, this time to chapter 2. If you remember the story, King Nebuchanezzar had dreams, vivid dreams, scary dreams for him. He didn't know what to do with them. He searched for people who could interpret them for him. But they could not. Why? Because to test the authenticity and spiritual power of these dream interpreters, he demanded that they first tell him the dream and then interpret it. Anyone could hear the dream and then make up an interpretation. But only a true spiritual power could first tell you the dream and then interpret it.

As you might expect, none of his gathered wise men could interpret the dream. They announced to him that there was not a man on earth who could pass such a test. But then Daniel came forward that he was up to the challenge. We see his report in Daniel 2:27-41. Once more, there is much here, but I want you to focus on the fact that it was predicted (from the last point), but further that this interpretation introduces the coming of a kingdom of God “in the midst of those kings.” In other words, in the middle of this history.

Daniel replied, “No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, [28](#) but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come. Your dream and the visions that passed through your mind as you lay on your bed are these: [29](#) “As you were lying there, O king, your mind turned to things to come, and the revealer of mysteries showed you what is going to happen. [30](#) As for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because I have greater wisdom than other living men, but so that you, O king, may know the interpretation and that you may understand what went through your mind. [31](#) “You looked, O king, and there before you stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue,

awesome in appearance. [32](#) The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, [33](#) its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. [34](#) While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. [35](#) Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were broken to pieces at the same time and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth. [36](#) “This was the dream, and now we will interpret it to the king. [37](#) You, O king, are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; [38](#) in your hands he has placed mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold. [39](#) “After you, another kingdom will rise, inferior to yours. Next, a third kingdom, one of bronze, will rule over the whole earth. [40](#) Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron—for iron breaks and smashes everything—and as iron breaks things to pieces, so it will crush and break all the others. [41](#) Just as you saw that the feet and toes were partly of baked clay and partly of iron, so this will be a divided kingdom; yet it will have some of the strength of iron in it, even as you saw iron mixed with clay. [42](#) As the toes were partly iron and partly clay, so this kingdom will be partly strong and partly brittle. [43](#) And just as you saw the iron mixed with baked clay, so the people will be a mixture and will not remain united, any more than iron mixes with clay. [44](#) “In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. [45](#) This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces. “The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and the interpretation is trustworthy.”

So, from the perspective of Daniel, the prophet, there would be a series of kingdoms, each having its distinctives, yet each taken over by the next. BUT, as it says in v.44, “In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed.” Right in the middle of this parade of human kingdoms, God will plant an everlasting kingdom. That is my point. The timing of the coming of the promised King was designed to be right in the middle, perhaps not literally, but certainly figuratively. This event would occur and change, not occur and end, not happen right now. It was a future event that would change everything, be everlasting, yet time would go on. It would happen in the middle. God’s promise to David in 2 Samuel 7 was clearly understood by David to be a promise of a Son in the distant future. (8:19)

So, did it happen in the middle? As I acknowledged earlier, I have no way to know for certain. We are still in the midst. We are living in the period of time after His coming (middle) and before His return (end). And I would point you to all of the predictions of His return, reminding you that there are as many of them as there were for His first coming, by the same authors, with the same detailed specificity.

And I would also note that we mark time with the coming of Christ at the center. This is 2017, which means how many years has it been since the coming of Christ? About 2017. Time before then? We count it as “B.C.” Time after that? “A.D. Now before some of you get all hot and bothered, I am well aware that man made that system of marking time with the full knowledge after the fact of the coming of Christ. In other words, those who set up the system put the coming of Christ at the center of our marking of time. And I am also aware that there are still a few who use a different system. And I am aware that the secular world around us has had to give different designations for the marking of time, BCE (before common era) and CE (common era). But this does not change the fact that under the sovereign hand of holy God, the marking of time for all of human history has the coming of Christ at the precise center. Even those who reject Him mark time by His coming. There is a center to our understanding of time. It does not start at the beginning and count from there. It starts at the middle and counts in both directions. Coincidence? I don’t think so. Reflect the guiding hand of Almighty God? Without a doubt.

The coming of Christ happened “in the fullness of time.” At the perfectly precise point where God intended. By His plan.

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

1) We will recognize where we are in history. You can't think about His coming without remembering His return.

2) We will reject the common notion that these Christmas texts are just made up cute stories meant to inspire. They are designed to show fulfillment.

3) We will gain confidence and courage knowing that the truth of Scripture, the message of Scripture has passed the tests of authenticity.

4) We will rejoice all the more that our Savior, our Messiah, our Christ Jesus came at precisely the right time.