

Galatians 4:4-5

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[0 : 00] Well, please turn back to Galatians 4, if you have a Bible. The perfect gift, I don't know if you give gifts at Christmas, if you're into that kind of thing, but the perfect gift is a gift that is given in just the right place at just the right time.

I've told this story before, but I think it's worth telling again, the story of passengers who are waiting to board a flight to Toronto in Canada. They waited in the departure lounge, and as they waited, they were asked on a survey, what would be your ideal Christmas present?

If you could have anything, what would it be? That was the simple question. But what they didn't know, filling out this questionnaire, was that the airline, in a publicity stunt, during the flight, was going to track down every single item that people wished for, that they dreamed of.

And then in the exact place, at exactly the right time, the gifts would be delivered, just as the passengers got to luggage reclaim, you know, with the conveyor belt coming around.

Instead of suitcases and bags, they see boxes with wrapping and ribbons and name tags moving along, mobile phones and a snowboard and free flights for the family.

[1 : 30] One family got a 4K 50-inch plasma screen TV. And people were elated getting the right presence in the right place at the right time.

Apart from one sceptic who regretted his choice after telling the questionnaire, he simply wanted a pair of socks. And he was absolutely kicking himself.

Because a gift was being prepared, just what they'd always wanted, that would be in the right place, just at the right time.

Just right. The best kind of gift. It's a really cheesy story, isn't it? But that is Paul's take on the incarnation. And I want to focus in on chapter 4, verse 4 and 5 this morning.

Just those two verses. Because in that passage, Paul, in his treatment of the birth of Jesus Christ, says that the gift God gives is perfect.

[2 : 32] It is just right. It is given to fulfil our needs perfectly because it's given at the right time. And it's given in the right place.

They're my two points this morning. It was given just at the right time. Given just at the right time. There are stories over the internet of births with the most incredible timing.

One couple celebrated the birth of their daughter on the 10th of the 10th month, 2010. But the amazing thing was that their second child, so the one born before that child, was born on the 9th of the 9th, 2009.

That was their second child. Their first child, believe it or not, yes, you know where this is going, was born on the 8th of the 8th, 2008. The timing was incredible.

It was impeccable. And Paul says that the gift was even more perfectly timed than that. Look at verse 4. When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his son, born of a woman.

[3 : 47] The gift, it came just at the right time, Paul says. There was something very timely about his birth. The timing was almost incredible. If you think about it, what we know about the birth of the Lord Jesus, it came, didn't it?

He came as the Roman Empire brought a unique window in history for the Gospel to travel. There was the Pax Romana, the kind of peace of the land in the Empire.

There was a good transportation system. And like never before, the Greek language was the common language. So that the message of Jesus' ministry could spread throughout the known world.

It was a unique window of opportunity in history. And it was finely tuned as we read the Gospel accounts of the birth. It just so happened that a decree from Augustus, Caesar Augustus, was sent out.

Meaning that Mary and Joseph had to go to Bethlehem to be registered, fulfilling the word of the prophets. All of the elements in time came together just at the right moment, didn't they?

[4 : 56] When Herod, that paranoid madman, just happened to be on the throne. That he might force the exile of the young Jesus to Egypt, fulfilling the scriptures.

God's timing, as you read the Gospel accounts, there's more, isn't there? It was, and is, and will always be perfect. His gifts are not given one day late, or one day early.

God timed it to perfection for all these political and cultural and linguistic and prophetic elements to align purposefully.

And when we read the Gospels, we say, don't we, you are kidding me. This is impeccable timing. It's incredible timing. He is a master of timing in the giving of his gifts.

But there is more to this than even all of that. The timing of the gift was more rich than that, Paul says.

[6 : 01] And do you remember, in this section of the letter, the timing here is much deeper and it's much more spiritual, actually. I don't know if you've ever thought about the question of why Jesus was born when he was born.

Sort of in the whole timeline of God's people. Why now? Why not send Jesus the day after Adam and Eve sinned? Why not?

Jesus could have been born, couldn't he? He could have been crucified on that first week after the fall. Couldn't he? He could have died for sin then.

Why wait this long to send Jesus? Or, why not wait even longer? Why has he already come? Why not just send him just before Jesus comes back?

He could have sent Jesus, I don't know, on the Monday, couldn't he? Jesus could have died on the Wednesday and then ascended and come back on the Friday. It could have all happened in one week. Why this timing?

[7 : 08] Why these gaps? Because for Paul, the timing is more than just matching up the events in the Roman Empire, although that is amazing, isn't it?

It is actually about the real purpose of time in the life of God's people. Where the timing is just right for them to receive the gift.

They needed to be in arrivals at the right time as the gift emerged. We saw last Sunday, didn't we, how the time before the birth, Paul says, was a time under captivity, under the law.

The people of Israel, they were kept by the law. For they were waiting for a perfect man to fulfil it for them. In faith. That was what the Lord drew them towards.

Faith in God to send this person. They were waiting for freedom from its demands. And then in chapter 4, Paul uses another analogy of waiting, doesn't he, in verse 1.

[8 : 13] He says, I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave. Though he's the owner of everything, but he's under guardians and managers until the date set by his father.

A child in a family needing to wait until a date set by dad before he comes into an inheritance. Until then he's under guardians, isn't he, and managers.

And so he's saying, Jesus' gift, the gift of Jesus was timed. He didn't come until now. Because in God's timing, he knew that something needed to happen with his people.

They needed to grow up. Like a child, God's people needed to come of age, spiritually. I remember growing up in our house, mum and dad kept a box on top of the wardrobe.

And in that box was a gift for me. It was going to be a gift. I knew what it was going to be, a train set, but I didn't know what that meant.

[9 : 27] But I'd never seen it fully. And I had to wait until I grew up. That's what they always used to say. Wait until you grow up. And I thought it was so unfair.

Why not now? Why not today? Why can't I have this gift now? But when the day eventually did come, I understood, just looking at the intricacy of the railway, and the workings of the carriages and all the rest of it, and the expense and the value of the gift.

It just needed time. I needed time in the longing and the looking up at the unreachable heights of the wardrobe.

To receive it with a joy and a fuller thanksgiving, the timing had to be just right. And Paul says God's people for their childhood were imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed.

And under managers until the date set by the Father. We, as God's people, needed to understand what it was going to cost God to be our God.

[10:39] We needed to learn the nature of our sins over time. We needed to be humbled as a people by our own weaknesses.

And so his timing isn't just practical and kind of pragmatically, perfectly aligned. It is parental timing. God doesn't send Jesus too early, so that we could learn throughout an age of this captivity under the law, about his grace and his forgiveness and his long suffering, and this preparation time, and what it would mean to give his son for us in this way.

And he doesn't wait too long either, lest God's people should fall under absolute despair and disappointment. But God knew we needed time.

And so he designated that period of salvation history for his people to be under guardians in this world, to receive the gospel message, and to look to him by faith, to understand what on earth, literally, he was going to do, to appreciate what he was going to do.

And he knows that we need that too. God never does things too soon. He never does them too late, in my life and in your life.

[12:11] And when we long and when we look upwards, we can be sure, can't we, that his gifts, all of them, are given at the right time. B.B. Warfield said that each event falls with exact precision into its proper place in the unfolding of his eternal plan.

Nothing, however small, however strange, occurs without his ordering, or without its peculiar fitness for its place in the working of his purpose. I don't know if you give presents on Christmas Day, but growing up, it always had to be timed properly.

I don't know if it's just tradition, but there was always a time to do the presents. You know? Not too early, kind of spoil the mood with too many things, too many toys around, but not too late, so that the kids weren't half asleep.

So we would exchange gifts after lunch, at three o'clock. Three p.m. My dad had it all worked out, and he would sit next to the Christmas tree and divvy out the presents.

Dad knows best with these kind of things, I learnt. And it's as if God operates a bit like that, isn't it? He chooses the timing for the gift giving.

[13:35] He parentally sets the routine. He asks, doesn't he, how long should they wait? How long is too long? My people need a period of humbling, and of understanding, and of learning, and of training, and of captivity under this law, that they need to know this needs to be fulfilled in some way, and what that is going to mean.

And when the time is right, I will send this gift. When will they be ready? He asks those questions, doesn't he? So that they will see and understand my glorious generosity much better, when they will be humbled, and they will be hopeful.

But notice how he describes the timing of the gift in verse 4. He says, when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son.

When the fullness of time had come. One way of measuring time is to pour a kind of liquid or something from one container into another, isn't it?

So think of an hourglass where sand drops into the bottom bit, or you could drip, drip, drip some water into a bucket, couldn't you? And that would take a certain amount of time, and you can measure it.

[15:00] And Paul is saying here, time works like that in God's schedule, in God's mind. Time is not just this sort of endless thing that is out there that we can kind of fit around and play with.

Time is a created thing, and it's measured out, and poured out, and apportioned to all of history, and measured back to God.

There is a beginning of time, isn't there, in Genesis 1, and there is an end of time in this world. And as the water drip, drip, drip, drips, day after day, and month after month, and century after century, God is the one who is filling his bucket of time.

And as Jesus arrives, the drips, Paul is saying, are reaching the brim of the bucket. It's like one of those infinity pools, isn't it, where you can't see the edge anymore.

You can't see the brim anymore. Time itself, in the giving of this gift, in an absolute sense, is drawing to a close. It's full now, Paul is saying.

[16:16] And so we see, can't we, that time, that history itself, is marked, beginning, middle, and end, by what God is planning to give to his people.

Do you see this connection? All of history is God's Christmas family gift schedule. Where time is not marked by geological ages, or periods of technology, Bronze Age, and Iron Age, and Information Age, or Enlightenment Age.

They're not important to God, actually. All the ages, and all time, is simply before or after three o'clock in the afternoon.

Gift-giving time. That's how he measures it. And so now the gift has been given, the whole bucket of history is filled.

And it's filled, all of it, for this moment. All of the waiting, and all of the training, and all of the captivity under the law, and all of the learning fills this bucket all time.

[17 : 29] And all times, good or bad, fill this bucket. So that we would learn, as a people, how desperately we needed this gift. That we would learn, through backsliding, and through judgments, and through disappointments, and encouragements, and exile, how much we needed it.

But this is the whole purpose of history. To time the gift. 3pm. God doesn't just choose the most suitable time to send his son, does he?

Neither does he sort of sit around twiddling his thumbs, waiting for this date that he's set, sometime in the future. That night in Bethlehem was about parental timing.

In the Christmas family gift schedule. Time to get the box down from the wardrobe, God said. And as we reflect on that, we realise, I think, three things here.

We realise that God is the perfect giver of gifts. Not only does he know what we need, but when we need it. Aren't much of our lives spent asking that question, how long, oh Lord?

[18 : 49] How long? But we realise, don't we, he is a God who gives at the right time. Just think of the Lord Jesus meeting with his disciples on that last moments together before his crucifixion.

he says to Peter, the bemused Peter, as he washes Peter's feet, doesn't he? What I am doing to you now, you don't understand, but afterwards you will understand.

we might think, might we, why did this happen now? Of all the times this could have happened to me, why now?

Why not then? And why can't that thing I want happen now? But we remember that God is the one with the bucket, with the gift-giving family schedule, and Dad knows best.

Spurgeon said, those who have hope can wait. It's true, isn't it? We realise that he is a great giver of gifts, and then we realise how much he loves his people.

[20 : 05] Because all of history, everything that happens, leave or remain, war or peace, winter or summer, all of it is designed for the gifts of God to be manifest and enjoyed at the right time, and for him to be praised for that.

Just fancy that, just think of that. Romans 8, 28, Paul says, we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

And we see that all of history is centred on this giving of a gift. gift. We see that God marks time and measures it with a view to the salvation of his people, and he cares that much.

That all of history is about the church, his people, and his glory within it, and then receiving gifts from him. And then thirdly, we realise that the time is full.

God sent his son in the fullness of time, when the bucket was at the very brim, the top. Folks, this is nearly it.

[21 : 19] With the birth of Jesus, the bucket is nearly over-spilling in all of history, and what a time to live in. If Abraham, the father of faith, were here right now, he would be absolutely blown away.

At the knowledge, and the perspective that we have on salvation history, that he would get to eat and drink with the risen Lord Jesus, the one that he had faith in, without knowing it explicitly.

What a time to be in. And with all that history behind us, and with all that collective experience, and we are closer now than we ever were to that last day of his return.

And so the gift was given at just the right time, in the fullness of time, but secondly, it was given in just the right place. It was given in just the right place.

What do I mean? It was given in Bethlehem, in Judea, that's where he was born, in the place that God had worked in and dwelt in, and we could list again, couldn't we, all the prophecies and fulfillments of how the Messiah was to be born in that place.

[22 : 34] We can see God's placement is just perfect, just as his timing is. Jesus travelling to Egypt and growing up in Nazareth, all part of being in the right place for Jesus' lowly ministry.

Paul, though, again, sees a deeper perfection in the placing of the gift. Just look at verse 4 again there. God sent forth his son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law.

Paul says that is the place where Jesus was born. He is born in a stable, he is born in this world, he comes to us in the place of human flesh, and all of those things are true, but it's so that he could be born in this place, under the law.

Under the law, which binds human beings, which makes demands of us, right demands, which because of our failure it brings condemnation upon us.

God's holy law. Remember that Paul is talking here, isn't he, about the accumulation of ceremonial and religious laws, which signified for God's people their imperfections, and their inability to save themselves, and Jesus is born into a situation of bondage, he is born in a place of imprisonment, he is brought up, isn't he, behind bars, under means to be subject to something, to be a servant of something, he is servant of the law, and where you are born determines how you are going to live the rest of your life, doesn't it?

[24 : 31] It determines what you will do, and what job you'll have, and how you'll live, and he is born in that place of submission to the law, and this will be his whole life, this is his vocation, to live a life of perfection and submission.

It is such unexpected behaviour for a king to have, isn't it? To be born in a prison, to be subject to something. It's told the story, and I don't know if it's true, but it's a great story anyway, of King Henry VIII, he once dressed up as a commoner to have a night-time walk in London, but at one time two police constables mistook him for a vagabond, and arrested him, throwing him into prison.

The police were mortified when they found out who he was, expecting the worst kind of reprisals. We've just put King Henry VIII in prison, but he chose to stay in the cell for the night, and he rewarded the police constables for their efforts.

It's a pretty unusual behaviour, isn't it? And it is such unusual behaviour that God the King comes and willingly stays in prison, stays in the prison, he comes to be a man in the prison for a time, he comes with his eyes on those who are under the law to share that prison with them.

And so he is a King who is not aloof from where he rules, he rules next to the people in their prison with them, he comes in our flesh, and experiences our temptations, and he feels our prison, he is with us in that sense.

[26 : 18] But not just so that he can give us some company, being born of woman, being born under the law, not just so that he can say, I know what it's like to be human, although he can say that to us.

I know what it's like to face temptation, I know what it's like to be limited and mortal and weak and imprisoned, it's not just so that he can do that, no, he is with us in the prison, so he can get us out of the prison.

He is born under the law, verse 5, to redeem those who were under the law. The whole purpose of his slavery is to get us out of it, and to release us from it, to redeem us from it, and make us graduate from being slaves, to being sons, adopted sons, and receiving all of those privileges.

God, the king, comes and willingly stays, he comes to be with men in the prison, to redeem those who are in the prison.

I was trying to find a good analogy of this, and I realise actually the best analogies are in the Bible itself, aren't they? Because the story of Joseph is just perfect here, isn't it?

[27 : 45] This is what happened to him. He is the guy, isn't he, who is always in the wrong place at the wrong time growing up, isn't he? He's thrown into a pit by his brothers, he's sold into slavery, he's falsely accused, and he ends up in prison for two years.

But isn't it in the very fact of his slavery, that brings rescue for his brothers, and for all the people of Egypt.

It is his very imprisonment that leads to the redemption of his brothers, and the giving of food in the famine. He even saves those people who put him in prison in the first place, doesn't he, his brothers.

And that would have never happened had Joseph remained outside of the pit, or outside of the prison. He needed to be imprisoned to redeem his brothers.

This was his reason for living. Not just his birth, not just his death, but all he did as a man was part of this vocation of being under the law.

[29 : 03] And if you think about it, the visible place of Jesus' birth matches the invisible place, doesn't it, of his life. He was born in a cattle shed, placed in a manger with the muck and the mess.

He is born as a lowly outcast. He's born not in a palace to be a proud king, but in a stable to be a servant king, to be a slave king, to redeem those who are slaves under the law with him.

Some might have thought might may with the sending of the son, as they looked at him there in the manger, this king, surely he is in the wrong place at the wrong time here.

Well, hindsight is a wonderful thing, isn't it? God was preparing the perfect gift, that all of history would vow to his plan for the giving of it, for his gifts are given at just the right time and in just the right place for us and for our salvation, for the coming of age of his church and for his praise and for our thanksgiving.

I think the hard thing in the Christian life is that we have to wait and maybe more it's the question while we wait, why are we waiting?

[30 : 37] And so often we just have to say, I don't know actually why. We want to try and guess and measure God's bucket of time, don't we?

But all we know is that Dad knows best. And we as those who have hope, we can wait.

We can wait. We can