

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS MIRACLE

“If I had not come” (John 15:22). ***“But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law”*** (Galatians 4:4). In the first verse, which is really just a fragment of a verse, Jesus invites us to consider a possibility. What if he had not come to earth? What if he had not been born in Bethlehem? What if he had not walked the dusty roads of Judea? What if he had not uttered those wonderful words we call the Sermon on the Mount? What if he had not walked on water? What if he had not made the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk? What if he had never raised the dead? What if we didn't have his words to comfort us, to challenge us, to teach us, and to lead us to God? What if he never died on the cross? What if he never rose from the dead? What if he never sent his disciples out into the world? Where would we be? And what kind of world would this be? How would things be different if he had not come?

In just a few days we will celebrate the anniversary of Christ's birth. It's not exactly 2000 years but it's close enough. We're not sure what year he was born and we're not sure what day is really his birthday. It might be December 25 but no one knows for certain. The fact that we don't know the exact day or year shouldn't upset your faith. Secular historians didn't record his birth and among the gospel writers, only Luke gives us specific historical information to work with. The New Testament doesn't command us to remember his birthday with a yearly celebration. That started in the early church several centuries later. The great message of the Christian faith may be found in the declaration that God was manifest in the flesh, that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, that Jesus was God Incarnate, fully man yet somehow also fully God. A God who fully came!

1. What is the meaning of “fully come”

The second verse invites us to consider God’s timing. **“But when the time had fully come.”** That phrase “had fully come” is a very picturesque Greek expression. It speaks of something that is complete and fully developed, like a ripe apple ready to be picked. Or like a pregnant woman feeling labor pains, ready to deliver her baby. It describes the moment in history when all things were in place, when all the pieces were on the board, that one moment when the stage was perfectly set. At that moment, not earlier and not later, God sent forth his Son. God’s timing is perfect.

2. How Did God Prepare the World

Jesus said, **“If I had not come.”** And Paul said, **“When the time had fully come.”** Meaning, when time itself was pregnant and ready to deliver, when the stage was fully set, God sent forth his Son. If we stand back and look at history, what do we discover about the world in the days when Christ was born? Four simple statements answer that question.

- **It was a period of international peace.** For only the second time in the history of the Roman Empire, the doors of the Temple of Janus (the god of war) in Rome were closed, meaning that the Empire was not at war anywhere. The great Pax Romana, the Roman Peace, was in force which meant that the whole Mediterranean world was united under one government. No doubt you’ve heard it said that “all roads lead to Rome.” That statement was literally true. The Romans had built a road system that stretched from Rome in all directions. That enabled the gospel message to quickly spread to all parts of the known world.

- It was a time of religious ferment. Across the empire the mystery religions were in decline. There were so many gods in ancient Greece that the one writer called Greece one large altar. And Judaism was ripe for the Messiah to come. During those 400 “silent years” the Jews had migrated to every corner of the ancient world. Judaism flourished as the Jews built synagogues wherever they went. And where did Christianity begin? It emerged from the womb of Judaism. Early church worship was modelled after synagogue worship. Where did the Apostle Paul start when he went to a new city? Looking back, we can see clearly that God had placed his chosen people, the Jews, in strategic positions to help advance the gospel.
- It was an era of moral decline. Athens was in the late afternoon of its glory. The gods of Greece and Rome no longer could command the blind allegiance of the masses. Education, philosophy and great art created desires they could not fill. In the end the verdict was clear. Athens could produce Aristotle, Socrates, Euripides, and Aristophanes. Rome produced Seneca, Cicero, Juvenal, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Julius Caesar. But the best man could do was not enough. Nothing could fill the “God-shaped vacuum” inside the human heart. Art, literature, poetry, music, architecture, and the greatest military machine the world had ever known, all of it taken together could not provide meaning to life, or point the way to lasting forgiveness, or offer any answer to three questions we all must answer: Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? This is the world into which Christ came. It is the world Paul describes so graphically in Romans 1, a world that knew the truth but suppressed it, ignored the true God, and turned to idolatry. It was a world that was given over to paganism, sexual immorality, homosexuality, murder, perversion, dishonesty, and brutality.

- It was an age of prophetic fulfilment. What started in Genesis continued throughout the Old Testament. God promised over and over that he would intervene in history. One day the Messiah would come. There was an ever-narrowing stream of prophecy, the promises becoming more and more specific. Until it happened. The angel came to Zechariah and Elizabeth. Then to Mary. Then to the shepherds. Then the Magi in the east saw the star and knew the King of the Jews had been born. Herod, that evil and sick king tottering on the throne in Jerusalem, seems to have been caught by surprise. But the scribes weren't. They knew the baby would be born in Bethlehem.

Thus the stage was set for the coming of Christ. It happened just as God said it would. Not too soon. Not too late. ***“But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son.”*** I come back to my starting point, to the words of Jesus, ***“If I had not come.”*** If Christ had not come, how would the world be different? Just for a moment, imagine that some powerful hand has wiped the influence of Christ out of our civilisation, as a hand would clean a blackboard in a schoolroom. Go to a library to find no trace left of the life or words of Jesus. All has vanished. In the encyclopaedias the entries on “Jesus Christ” have all been removed.

In the museums where “The Transfiguration” and “The Last Supper” and “Christ on the Cross” had been, there are only empty spaces. The works of the great masters are gone. The great cathedrals have disappeared. If Christ had not come, the Christian hospitals and schools that have had such a magnificent influence both at home and abroad, would all perish, as if shaken down by some cosmic earthquake. If Christ had not come, all the churches and their good works would be erased from the earth.

No missionaries spreading the gospel. No Wycliffe Bible Translators. No Christian relief agencies bringing hope and help to the hurting people of the world. No Christian colleges, no seminaries, no Bible correspondence schools. No Christians doctors, lawyers, dentists, no godly business people donating their time and resources for Christ and his Kingdom. No Christmas carols. No children singing "Away in the Manger." No "Sweet Little Jesus Boy." No "I'll be home for Christmas." No Christmas Eve services for there is no Christmas to celebrate. No churches anywhere if he did not come.

I love the way Charles Spurgeon said it; *"There are no loose threads in the providence of God ... The great clock of the universe keeps good time."* Some of us need to hear this because we wonder (and secretly fear) that God has forgotten us. Perhaps you come to the end of this year with a sense of unfillment and perhaps a sense of dread about what next year will bring. Fear not, child of God. God's timing is perfect. When the time had fully come, God sent his Son. And when the time is fully come, he will keep all his promises to you.

He came at the appointed time - not a moment too late, not a second too early. This means that the first Christmas miracle started long before Bethlehem. It took place over many centuries as God prepared the world for the coming of his Son. And he is the Saviour for the whole world. One final note. Our text tells us that God sent forth his Son. That is, he was moving toward us while we were moving away from him. God sent his Son into a world that didn't know he was coming and didn't care that he had arrived. There was no welcoming committee in Bethlehem. No one ever captured the essence of why God sent his Son better than C. S. Lewis: *"The Son of God became a son of man so that the sons of man might become the sons of God."*

He came to where we were that he might lift us up to where he is. He doesn't say, "Climb up here." No! He comes down to where we are and lifts us up to where he is. This is the miracle of the gospel. Have you ever thanked God for sending Christ to the earth? Are you glad that he came? Have you ever considered where you would be if he had not come? Between now and Christmas morning take a few minutes to think about how your life would be different if Christ had not come. Think back to the way you were and then list the changes he has made in your life.

In just a few days Christmas will arrive and families will gather to open their gifts. God has a Christmas gift for you—wrapped not in bright paper and with fancy ribbon—but in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. It is the gift of his Son. It is for you. The gift is still there. It must be personally received. You can never truly enjoy Christmas until you can look in the Father's face and tell him you have received his Christmas gift. Have you done that?