

Unprecedented

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[0 : 0 0] Now, from that passage that we read in Galatians, I wanted to focus particularly, as you might guess at this season of the year, on verse 4, Galatians chapter 4 and verse 4, where we read these words, When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.

Unprecedented must be the word of the year, wouldn't you see? There are other candidates, no doubt, like pandemic and social distancing and other terms, but time and time again this year, and especially earlier on at the beginning of it all, we've heard people saying that we face an unprecedented situation. Dictionary definition of that says simply, never done or known before.

And obviously there has been much this year that has been totally unknown before. I've sometimes been wondering if very little children, toddlers, might think that, grow up thinking it's natural for us all to go around, go around with masks on and all that sort of thing. According to my concordances, the actual word, unprecedented, isn't found anywhere in the Bible. But this text, and really the whole Bible, is about an unprecedented event. This morning we considered a text that looked forward to what would be an unprecedented event. And here's a text now this evening, Galatians 4 and 4, that looks back on that unprecedented event. God sent his son to redeem those under law that we might receive the full rights of sons.

And there, in that one short text, you've got a lot of teaching about incarnation, about redemption, and about adoption into his family. And at the center of it all, there is the main clause, God sent his son.

Which is what Christmas is all about, of course, although we might not think so from the way many people speak and act. The famous visitor from Mars landing here perhaps would think that this season must be a time for overspending and overeating and exulting in nature worship, even trees and robins and reindeer and so on. And we know that there are those who are determined to keep Christ out of Christmas, sad souls who miss so much. I don't know if you followed the story about the chairwoman of the Robertson Trust in Stirling. And what she said was definitely not the free church. Anything but the free church.

[3 : 2 0] They don't believe in same-sex marriage. They don't believe in same-sex marriage. And it's said in the report that she was incandescent with rage. Well, legal issues are going on about that, of course.

But isn't that just what many people actually are saying about Christmas as well? Definitely not the birth of Christ. Anything but the birth of Christ. And it's a bit like celebrating the date in the calendar which falls precisely one month after Christmas that we really ought not to mention Robert Burns too much at that time. I mean, that simply isn't fair to all the other poets who have written at different times, is it? Why should Burns be specially commemorated? Fair enough to have the agus and neeps and wear a bit of tartan and all that sort of thing. And maybe we could still call it Burns Day, but let's keep Burns out of Burns Day.

That whole idea about Christmas is so crazy, but we live in a crazy, mixed-up world in so many ways. But Paul's emphasis, of course, is that it is God's world. It's into his world that Jesus came, and came at just the right time. Not a moment too soon and not a moment too late, just at the right time.

In the actual nativity story, in Luke, we read Luke 2 and 6, the time came for the baby to be born. And of course, we understand that to refer to the completion of the months of her pregnancy.

In that sense, it was time for the baby to be born. But on the lips of the Bible writers, the phrase means much more than that. It's not just referring to the ninth month of Mary's pregnancy, but the time which was right in a deeper way. It was God's time. It was the time prepared for from ages past. And you'll remember, I'm sure, how the Old Testament ends with a kind of a forward-looking glance, Malachi's prophecy of the time when the Lord would suddenly descend to his temple. And this morning, we looked at Micah's word about Bethlehem.

[5 : 49] From Bethlehem, a deliverer would come. And there's no doubt that when Paul says, when the time had fully come, that's what he means. There is a Christmas song in the praise hymn book that spells it out. The promised time arrives, the time of God's appointing, the time when one is born who bears the Lord's anointing. And indeed, this morning, what was that quotation from Spurgeon that I used this morning about the timing? It was, well, about the census it was. It was Caesar's whim, but it was God's decree.

Now, there were certain factors in the situation of the world then which pointed to it being the right time in God's sight, God's plan, God's appointed time. This may be familiar to some people here, but let me just make reference to the social background, the moral situation, and the spiritual climate of that world into which Jesus came at just the right time.

First of all, the social background. What was the world like into which Jesus was born? Well, of course, it was a Roman world. And it's interesting, in fact, that when we look at Luke's introduction to the ministry of Jesus, we find him dating his events by reference no less than five different officials, either Romans or administering parts of the Roman Empire. And we're used to thinking, I suppose, about the ruthless power of Rome, especially in relation to the later persecution of the church by them. But there were also many advantages that Rome brought to the world of these days. And in a remarkable way, that world, at least the Mediterranean world, was a kind of unified world. For one thing, there was the famous Pax Romana, the peace of Rome. And again, we would say it might have been an iron-fisted peace, putting down rebellion and any suggestion of a coup with ruthless might.

But yes, there was a kind of peace. As one writer has put it, Christ came to a generation when Roman peace held the world, held it no doubt with an iron hand, but held it sure and far-flung and unbroken.

And people could hear the Bethlehem angels sing. The peace of Rome, there were the roads of Rome, famously spreading out everywhere, triumphs of Roman engineering, along which eventually the missionaries of Christ would be able to travel with their message of good news. And in a strange way, really, Rome had fulfilled Isaiah 40's prophecy about a prepared way in the wilderness and a making straight of a highway for the Lord. And then thirdly, there was a common language, not of Rome itself, but Greek, which became the lingua franca, the common language of much of the world. Different provinces would have their own languages as well, but most people could understand Greek. And wherever the later missionaries went, they could be understood as they told out the good news of what Christ had done in their world. These things all played their part providentially in making it the right time for Jesus to be born. And in our time, we sometimes say the world has become a small place with modern transportation and communications whereby people can move about very speedily. I just happened to be looking at something this last week about the well-known missionary who died recently, Helen Rosevear, well, a few years ago now, who went to the Belgian Congo, as it was, and took five weeks to get there, which is very different from the missionary journeys of today. But ideas could spread like wildfire as well, or can do as well.

[10 : 27] And could it be the right time for God to come to our world in a new way? Not talking about the second coming, that's another subject altogether, but about a new move of God's Spirit. And that's certainly what we long for, isn't it? What we should pray for, for God to work through whatever means there are for reaching people with the gospel today. But that's one thing, just about the social background of Paul's word. When the time had fully come, God sent his Son. Then think secondly of the moral situation. Things had reached a pretty low ebb, as we see notably from the first chapter of Romans, which tells us much about the climate of the times. And you'll remember after mentioning various kinds of immoral actions, Paul wrote there, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant, and boastful. They invent ways of doing evil. They disobey their parents. They are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

It is a pretty ugly list. He goes on to say, not only do they do these things, but they also approve of those who practice them. Things that ought to be spurned and rejected are instead applauded.

And that's very, very apt today, isn't it, when you think of the way in which much public entertainment does exactly that, laughing at, finding fun in, and applauding things that are wicked and wrong. But that was Paul's description of the world of these days, and it was into such a world of depraved morals that Christ came. You know how some people apparently think of Jesus as born in some nice clean place and living in idyllic sunshine and talking about flowers and birds and so on?

Of course, he did talk about flowers and birds and all the rest, but Jesus didn't come just to tell nice stories to nice people, but to do battle with the devil and to redeem people from the power of sin and evil. That's what was happening in the coming of Jesus. And that's why so soon after his birth, there was that diabolical plan to kill him in the so-called massacre of the innocents.

That's why there was such an outburst of demonic activity surrounding the earthly ministry of Jesus. There was a battle. There was a real battle going on, and the powers of darkness realized that they were under threat. But in that chapter of Romans, Paul traced back all of these wicked things to one source. They did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God. They did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God. How apt a word is that for our time? Because there are so many in just that category, dismissing all teaching about God and his truth as just an idle tale.

[14 : 15] Definitely not Christianity. Anything but Christianity. And is it really a coincidence that we have an outburst of evil and violence and sheer wickedness such as we see in these days?

I just took a note of a sentence from one of the Christmas letters that we received from friends this week that says, as a society and culture that has turned its back on God and arrogantly gone its own way, we now find ourselves floundering out of our depths in the face of this and countless other crises.

And then it goes on to say, it's time to turn back. That hymn is surely right. It says, great is the darkness that covers the earth. Now, of course, there's a great deal of goodness in the world as well. A great deal of goodness and care and love. Of course, there is.

I know that. You know that as well. Day after day, there are people performing acts of love and mercy which don't hit the headlines. What's the saying? Good news is no news. That's sad, but it's maybe true.

Newspapers and the media are generally far more interested in wicked things than in good things. And yes, there is much goodness and kindness in the world.

[15 : 41] But then there is this other side as well. And looking at so many things in modern life, wouldn't you say that the words of that hymn are very apt?

That little phrase, watching while sanity dies. Because there is a kind of madness about today. Manifested in all these endeavors to keep Christ out of Christmas.

Manifested in the case of that politician who had to resign this week because she had made some comments simply about the need for tolerance for people who don't believe in same-sex marriage.

People who are, as the saying goes, on the wrong side of history. Although we know what is the right side of history really. But that was so awful. Wasn't it so awful that she should speak in favor of tolerance for that which our culture regards as intolerable?

And so she has to resign. Manifested too in this idea that people in Scotland might be prosecuted for things said in the privacy of their own homes.

[16 : 54] Big Brother is watching. And Big Brother insists that everyone must fall in line. So political correctness, it's no mild or even amusing tendency.

It is a real threat to freedom. And if things go on in the way that they are going just now, it does look as if days of persecution lie ahead for those who would walk in the ways of the Lord.

And we will be faced with the question, are we prepared to stand firm? Or will we yield to what is wrong? And if it was at the right time that Jesus was born, should we not be praying earnestly for God to act again in a new way in this time in which we live against the background of that moral situation to plead with him, come Lord Jesus, pour out your spirit on us today.

When the time had fully come, God sent his son. And I've referred to the social background, the moral situation. The other thing, we might refer to the spiritual climate into which he came.

So far as the Roman Empire is concerned, well, the Republic had become an empire and there was the need for some kind of religion to unite the empire, to hold things together.

[18 : 27] And in fact, you'll maybe know the actual word religion means something that ties things together or ties people together. So the same root as in a word like ligature.

And of course, the solution was emperor worship, which became a battering ram that struck down many non-conforming Christians at a later time.

But emperor worship was probably meant to foster patriotism by providing a symbol of the unity and solidarity of the empire.

And Augustus became known as Lord and even Savior, this man who issued a decree that all the world should be taxed.

But of course, the whole thing was, what good was that worship of Caesar when you had a guilty conscience or a broken heart?

[19 : 27] And wasn't there a need for something more? Jews looked for a coming Messiah, albeit many had reformed their expectation into the expectation of a military leader who would enable them to rise up against their oppressors.

But into that spiritual climate, it was at the right time that Jesus came. came to correct people's false hopes of the Messiah, came to teach the truth of God, came to do battle with the powers of evil, came to open up a new way of salvation.

And in this passage, in this text, if we can again home in on it a little bit more closely, we find Paul speaking about two things that Jesus came to do, to redeem and to adopt.

To redeem, it says, he sent his son born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law. Now, redeem, of course, means to buy back.

To buy back, in this case, people who have sold themselves to evil. And that's not referring only to what we might sometimes regard as the more obvious forms of wickedness, because, of course, the Bible's diagnosis is that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

[20 : 48] We all stand in need of the salvation, the redemption of Jesus, and that's what he came to do. And we can say, thank God, there is a Redeemer.

We could burst into song about that, couldn't we, if we were allowed. There is a Redeemer, God's own Son, the precious Lamb of God, the Messiah, the Holy One, our Savior.

To redeem and to adopt, it says that we might receive the full rights of sons. And verse 7, you are no longer a slave, but a son.

That's the message of the gospel, and that's what is held out by God. Adoption into his very family. And since you are a son, it says, God has made you also an heir.

And it's wonderful. This is the gospel of Christ. He came not just to give us wise teaching or good advice. He came to redeem people and to adopt them into his actual family, which is what the church is, the family of those adopted through Jesus Christ.

[22 : 02] So, verse 4 says, he sent his son. And when you look at verse 6, you find it said, he sent the spirit of his son into our hearts.

John Stott wrote about that. He sent his son that we might have the status of sonship, and he sent his spirit so that we might have the experience of it.

That's referring to the Abba part, that call of the Holy Spirit within that enables God's people to look up and address him as Abba, our father.

Not just our king, our sovereign lord of all the universe, the judge of all the earth. All of these things are so, but enables us to say, Abba, my father.

Which is well echoed in that chorus. Not so new. Now, perhaps, Abba, father, let me be. I've heard it said that some people would like their attitude would be to full stop at that.

[23 : 05] Abba, father, let me be. Just leave me alone. Let me be the way I am. But it doesn't end there, does it? Abba, father, let me be yours and yours alone. And then there's the prayer about God's keeping power.

Never let my heart grow cold. Never let me go. Abba, father, let me be yours and yours alone. Is that the prayer of your heart?

That prayer that in faith looks up to him as your redeemer and your father and that wants to be his and his alone.

Whatever that may mean, whatever it may cost even, because it may cost in the days that lie ahead. Isn't it interesting that there is talk, has been talk for some time about spirituality.

It's sometimes said that maybe people get tired of the materialistic world around us and look for something higher, something to transcend the world of things.

[24 : 13] And if it's true, if there is a spiritual hunger and thirst, well, let's pray that it is the gospel of Christ that is seen as the answer to that.

Because often it seems that it isn't. Often it seems that even if there is a spiritual thirst, people will look anywhere other than to Jesus Christ for the satisfying of that thirst.

But if the time was right for Jesus to come to be born at Bethlehem, may he come in mighty power today. Our hope lies not in the crassness of a materialistic world, not in the supposed freedom of a godless life, not in either some amalgam of all the various religions into one kind of catch-all with the supposed best bits of each.

Because that was a temptation to the people of these times, of Bible times, and it's a trend of many people today. No, the hope is in Jesus himself.

This baby whose birth is marked at Bethlehem at Christmastime, but who came not just so that we might have a nice time to brighten up these dark days of winter, but who came to redeem and to adopt.

[25 : 38] Micah looked forward to what would be an unprecedented event. Paul here looks back on what was an unprecedented event.

And it's not just his birth. Let me run through a few references here that I've made a note of. Listen to Matthew 9, 32 and 3.

It says there, a man who was demon-possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus, and when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke. The crowd was amazed and said, nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel.

Totally unprecedented. Then in Mark 1, 27, after Jesus cast out a demon in the Capernaum synagogue, the people were all so amazed that they asked each other, what is this?

A new teaching and with authority. Chapter after that, the guy let down through the hole in the roof, Mark 2 and 12.

[26 : 47] He got up, took his mat, and walked out in full view of them all, and this amazed everyone, and they praised God, saying, we have never seen anything like this.

Completely unprecedented. And remember the words at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, how it says the crowds were amazed at his teaching because he taught as one who had authority and not as the teachers of the law.

There was something new, different, unprecedented about it. John 7, 46, when the guards that were sent to arrest Jesus came back empty handed on that occasion, they were asked, why didn't you bring him in?

And what was their answer? No one ever spoke the way this man does. His birth was unprecedented, his teaching was unprecedented, his actions were unprecedented, his death was unprecedented in the sense that it was for others salvation, and because he conquered the power of death, of course, in his resurrection from the dead.

death. A few years ago, there was a report of a drop in sales during the pre-Christmas period, although I guess probably nothing like this year's.

[28 : 16] But it had happened, and the Bank of England was moved to issue a caution about jumping to premature conclusions. and the way it was expressed by the man who was the then governor of the Bank of England was, the full story of Christmas may not be clear until Easter.

That's what he said. He was talking economics, of course. Their calculations needed to wait. But you might have thought he was a preacher or an evangelist.

The full story of Christmas may not be clear until Easter. Well, indeed, because we're talking about the Christ who became incarnate at Christmas, but also the Christ who, by his unprecedented death, has opened up a new way of salvation for all who will receive him in repentance and faith.

The song that we referred to this morning, O Little Town, it says, how silently the wondrous gift is given. No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.

And this is good news for this season and for all times. Now, I've spoken of the right time in terms of the social background, the moral situation, and the spiritual climate of the time into which Jesus came.

[29 : 54] And whatever may be said about these or other factors that made it the right time, ultimately, of course, it was the time of God's appointing.

When the time had fully come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law that we might receive the full rights of sons.

And if by grace you know his redemption, praise God. If not, well, surely now is the time to turn to him in sincere repentance.

And if by grace you are adopted into his family, praise God. And if not, well, his invitation still stands, doesn't it?

The Christ who says, behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in.

[30 : 58] amen, and may God bless his word to our hearts. Let us pray. Our gracious Father, we thank you for this reminder of how the way was prepared for the right time in your timetable for our Savior to be born.

For all the prophecies forward to it, for all the circumstances in which you worked to ensure that it was the right time and for the fact that he did come, that you sent your son born under the law to redeem those under the law, that we might be adopted into your family for that redemption, for that adoption.

Our heavenly Father, we bring to you our thanks and praise, our heartfelt gratitude, and pray that you would help us always to live as those redeemed at such a great cost, as those who belong in your family, and as those who want to share that message with others.

And if there are any, Lord, who cannot say that they are redeemed or adopted, we pray that you would open blind eyes, that you would open hearts to receive that, Lord Jesus Christ, the one who indeed does knock, who says, if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in.

Thanks and praise be to you, O Lord, for that gospel of your Son. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

[32 : 43] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.