

December 31, 2023
10:00 am

The Fullness of Time Galatians 4:4-7

John DuBose
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

Away in a manger is one of my favorite Christmas songs, but there was one line that always seemed to me to be a little far-fetched. “The cattle are lowing the poor baby wakes. The little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.” Surely that couldn’t have been the case. Jesus was a human baby. Born in a dirty stable and laid in a feeding trough. Nothing about that sounds particularly cozy or comfortable. So, of course he cried, right? Babies tend to do that. When they’re uncomfortable, they cry. Trust me.

But I think there’s something to be said about having a savior who cried out for the comfort of his mother when he was a baby. Because otherwise, he’s not truly like us, is he? He doesn’t really enter into our situation without an understanding of how difficult it is. Because life isn’t always easy. We’re not always comfortable. Sometimes things feel a bit out of our control. What good is a savior who doesn’t understand that? Well, friends, that’s not the kind of savior we have. The God we meet in Jesus Christ is a God acquainted with the chaos of the world. It was He who met the chaos from the very beginning.

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void.”^a That translation doesn’t quite capture it though. In the Hebrew, the earth was *tohu vavohu*. As one translator puts it, “the earth was welter and waste...”^b In other words, it was an unfathomable primordial chaos. Chaos... but, “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And then, God spoke...”^c

By his Spirit, God spoke his divine Word, bringing order into the chaos. God separated the light from the darkness to create day and night. God separated the waters of the deep from the waters of the heavens. God brought forth land and plants and creatures and finally human beings, and God saw that it was very good. Order from out of the chaos. A purpose for all things. A vast universe set in motion, sustained in every moment by the same Spirit of God who spoke it into being.

But chaos crept back in, didn’t it? A serpent and a forbidden fruit. The spilled blood of Abel by his brother Cain. The waters of the heavens once again meeting the waters of the sea in the great flood. Chaos. And chaos would continue through the history of the people of God. Their slavery in Egypt; their division under wicked kings, their exile to Babylon; their continued

^a Genesis 1:1 ESV

^b (Alter, 2019)

^c Genesis 1:2 ESV

oppression at the hands of an evil empire even after they returned to the land God had given them. Chaos.

Apparently, chaos is the way of things in this world. So much of our own lives seems ruled by chaos. The chaos of war and division. The chaos of loneliness and isolation and a lack of purpose. The chaos of family breakdown and of devastating diagnoses and death and grief. All these things seem to rule our lives in ways that deprive us of control. And though we try, we can't wrestle our way out of this chaos.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul speaks to a church in chaos. A people trying to exercise control over their own situation, confusing their identity as Christians with a false gospel of righteousness according to the law. These Gentile Christians in Galatia had been convinced that, in order to be fully accepted into the family of the household of God, they would need to submit themselves to the strict adherence of the law of Moses. Having been brought into the fellowship of God by faith in Jesus Christ, their next step, they believed, was to start acting like Torah observant Jews. In this way, they would please God and enjoy all the benefits that God might afford them. In this way, they would be able to control the blessings of God; to bring order to the chaos of their lives.

But, it doesn't work that way does it? There's no secret formula to control God's favor. No steps to be taken in orderly fashion to impose order onto our own personal chaotic universes. And Paul says, if we try to do that, then we've quite clearly missed the point. If we try to do that, not only will we not become the masters of our own destiny, we will instead become slaves. Slaves to what Paul calls in verse 3, the elemental powers of the world.^d Slaves to the powers of chaos. And indeed, that's what we already were. That's the state into which we were born, says Paul.

Today, we find ourselves on the cusp of a new year; a time when we're probably more apt to think about time itself and its passing. Some of us may be brimming with hope for what the new year holds. Or perhaps we're just glad to see the previous year fall into the history books. Or maybe we're somewhere in between. Christmas, with all its joy and hope, has passed. But what did it really mean? Why won't the feeling of Christmas linger? Time passes, and with it, the chaos of life returns. How wonderful it would be for us to linger in that precious moment in time. In the words of WH Auden, "Remembering the stable where for once in our lives, everything became a You and nothing was an It."^e

Scottish pastor, Sinclair Ferguson, tells a story from his childhood experience of the day after Christmas, called boxing day in the UK, where he grew up He says,

"I suspect like many other children, on Boxing Day, I would try to recapture the feelings of the day before by putting my presents back into their boxes and then opening them up again. But of course, it was never the same. It could never be the same. Christmas Day was Christmas Day, twenty-four hours only once a year, unrepeated until near the end of the next long year—another year to wait for the excitement, the joy, the presents. And as

^d Galatians 4:3

^e (Auden, 1944)

a child, I hated this letdown and the demands it made on my patience. And try as I might, I could not make Christmas last.^f

The Galatians were subject to that same feeling. Trying to recreate by themselves the magic of their conversion by faith in Christ. Trying by force of will to make themselves more fully part of the story of God. But their sense of control, well, it's an illusion, isn't it? Later in Galatians 4, Paul says, "But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain."^g

But what if it's not at all as it seems? What if the great threat of chaos is really no threat at all? What if it's actually really and truly all in God's hands; under his control. Remember those words from Genesis 1 we heard earlier, "In the Beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep."^h But what does Scripture say next? "And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." And with a Word, God created order from the chaos.

It almost sounds like God knew what he was doing, doesn't it? And so it was when he sent his Son. Paul says, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. ⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God."ⁱ

The fullness of time had come. The fullness of time... that moment when Jesus Christ came into the world. Every moment before was leading up to Christ. Every moment after looks back to Christ. New years day comes and goes, indeed Christmas itself comes and goes, but God in Christ remains the same^j...

You see, Jesus was not an afterthought. He was not a quick fix from God because things got out of hand. He was always the purpose toward which creation was moving. Every bit of dust orbiting every star in every galaxy has its fulfilment in Jesus Christ. Every electron orbiting every atomic nucleus in all the universe has as its destiny the new creation in Jesus Christ. Chaos is not at the heart of the universe, Christ is. And why? Because God loves us. His intention from before time itself was to love us. To love you. To love me. At the end of this passage, Paul writes something remarkable. He says, "you are no longer a slave, but a son." He's talking to you in particular. I hope you'll forgive the grammar lesson, but it's second person singular.^k He's not saying, y'all Galatians are no longer slaves, but you, specifically, reader. You, listener. For you there sitting in the pew and for me, God sent his son Jesus out of love. What an incomprehensible miracle it is that the consummation of all creation would come into the world as a crying baby boy...for me and for you.

^f (Ferguson, 2023)

^g Galatians 4:9-11

^h Genesis 1:1

ⁱ Galatians 4:4-7

^s Hebrews 13:8

^k (Cousar, 1982)

My friends, God was always in control. In God's time, he set us free from our slavery to the elemental spirits of the world. To the forces of chaos that we could not control. He did this by becoming one of us. By stooping low to meet humanity in the very dust from which we're made. In the words of John Calvin, "By putting the chains on himself, he takes them off the other."¹ And not only does he set us free from bondage, but he places upon us a crown of his own righteousness. God has sent his son to secure our freedom. But what does that freedom mean? Well, the Galatians thought it was freedom to do more for God. But what Paul says is that you can't do more for God, because God has done everything already on your behalf. In fact, God's love is so powerful that it makes you more than free. It makes you his beloved child. The Spirit that hovered over the waters of chaos in the beginning is the same Spirit hovering within your heart. The Spirit who speaks creation into being is the same Spirit who causes us to cry out, "Abba, Father!"

A love like that changes a person, doesn't it? A person who is loved like that has no desire to control because they've already got everything they need. Pastor Sinclair Ferguson goes on to say,

"I thought Boxing Day had to do with boxes in which my presents had come, but actually, it's called Boxing Day for another reason entirely. It's because the day after Christmas Day traditionally was the day Christians would put food and other things in boxes and distribute them to the needy. In a way, it was saying, at least symbolically: "In His birth, the Lord Jesus gave Himself to us, and in His death, He gave Himself for us. And now, He lives to take care of us in our need. And so, in response, in Jesus' name, we want to take care of you as well.""^m

How do we bring order to the chaos? Well, thankfully, we can't. Because God has already done it. He did it in a manger. On a cross. In a stone rolled away from an empty tomb. There's nothing more for us to do but to allow ourselves to feel his love and to love in return. When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son. Thanks be to God.

References

- Alter, R. (2019). *The Hebrew Bible Volume 1: The Five Books of Moses*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- Auden, W. (1944). *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*. Random House.
- Cousar, C. B. (1982). *Galatians: a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching*. Atlanta: John Knox Press.
- Ferguson, S. (2023, December 26). *Making Christmas Last*. Retrieved from Ligonier Ministries: <https://www.ligonier.org/podcasts/things-unseen-with-sinclair-ferguson/making-christmas-last>

¹ (Cousar, 1982)

^m (Ferguson, 2023)