

In the Fullness of Time

Today, millions celebrate the birth of Christ. Those who argue about December 25th not being the actual birth date of Christ miss the greater point – the legitimacy of celebrating the incarnation, and of proclaiming it to the world.

One of the marvellous things about the birth of Jesus Christ was, in fact, its providentially incredible timing. How ironic, that those who claim to be most accurate about the timing of Christ's birth by rejecting a particular date instead end up missing the many other truths related to the timing of His birth. In Galatians 4:4, Paul wrote:

But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, (Gal 4:4)

The fullness of time is a phrase which could be compared to the old hour glasses which had sand running into them. When God's Messianic hour glass was full of sand, so to speak, it was now the appointed time, time was up – it was the exact moment to send His Son into the world. He sent Him out from Himself, from heaven – His only begotten Son, to be born of a virgin, born into the nation of Israel under the law.

The birth and incarnation of Christ is a beautiful and joyful study in God's providence. When we see how all the various circumstances and factors, political, historical, commercial, linguistically we can only but rejoice in the wisdom and artistry of God's overruling hand.

To begin with, the political situation had been carefully guided to what it was at the time of Christ's birth. The world had seen the likes of the Assyrian Empire, the Babylonian Empire, the empire of the Medes and Persians, the Greek Empire, followed now by the Roman Empire. In fact, much of this was prophesied by Daniel in chapters 2 and 7 of his book. For the most part, each empire extended the borders of the previous one and brought more people under its influence. Now, at this chosen time, the Roman Empire had reached a size unmatched by any empire before it. God had been allowing this to happen for thousands of years prior to this, to bring this about. The so-called *pax romana* – Roman peace – was now in the world. The largest empire the world had ever seen was now at peace – the stage was set for the arrival of mankind's Messiah. God is king over nations, as Nebuchadnezzar heard in his dream,

"This decision is by the decree of the watchers, And the sentence by the word of the holy ones, In order that the living may know That the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, Gives it to whomever He will, And sets over it the lowest of men.'" (Dan 4:17)

Not only was the birth of Christ timed perfectly from a political standpoint, but it was also perfect from a commercial standpoint. The Roman Empire, with its military ambition, had devised an amazing communication and transportation system for their troops. This meant that as Christ grew up and completed His ministry; His message could be effectively carried to the farthest reaches of the known Roman world. The Gospel would spread by means of roads constructed by unbelieving Romans. In fact, Rome's efficient postal system meant that the New Testament letters, the revelation of

the New Testament, spread throughout the empire of the time. Truly, God chose and supervised the fullness of time.

Then there is the issue of language. Three centuries before Christ, Alexander the Great conquered the world and established Greek as the common tongue spoken throughout the world. Greek had become the most known and spoken language of the Roman Empire. The one language meant that the life of Christ, as recorded in the gospels, the letters of Paul, Peter, James, John and Jude could be read and understood by Gentiles in every part of the Roman empire. But there was another benefit to this. In about 250 B.C., the Greeks wanted a copy of the Old Testament in Greek. This translation was done over a period of about 100 years, and became known as the Septuagint. Well, what this did was introduce the revelation of God, the truths of Jehovah God, to the world at large. No longer did you need to know Hebrew to understand the truth about the Creator God, you could read about it in your own tongue and this played a great part in preparing the world for the Gospel.

But there's more. God had also prepared the world philosophically. That is, he had allowed the musings and ideas of unsaved men to come close enough to the truth so that when His Son came, they would immediately understand. . For example, John begins his Gospel by saying:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."(Joh 1:1)

The Greek term for Word is *logos*. But a number of Greeks had talked about this concept of *logos* for many years. Heraclitus in 500 BC used *logos* to talk about a universal sense of reason or order. . In 400 BC, Anaxagoras described this *logos* as a type of intermediary between God and man. Philo, in around 20BC viewed the *logos* as an intermediary between God and man, and even described it as God's firstborn son, an ambassador, an advocate, a high priest. So when John wrote – *In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the logos was God*, God had set the scene philosophically.

Politically, commercially, linguistically and philosophically, the world was ready for the Messiah. But as we look into the accounts of Matthew and Luke, we find many other gems regarding the perfection of God's timing.

One of them was the timing of Zacharias's lot. We read in Luke 1:

"So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.(Luk 1:8-9)

We are told that the burning of incense was an unusual honour enjoyed by few priests since their duties were assigned by the casting of lots. This offering of incense was only allowed once in a priest's lifetime. Just think of how Zacharias could have been selected by lot early in life to burn incense and never again. But we know Proverbs 16:33 says:

"The lot is cast into the lap, But its every decision is from the LORD."(Pro 16:33)

God perfectly chose the time for Zacharias to offer incense, and there made the angelic announcement of John the Baptist's birth, the forerunner of the Messiah. God made sure a public announcement was made that all would hear.

Another of the gems of providence as we look at the birth of Christ is the personal history of Mary and Joseph. Not much is said about this, but just imagine the care God took to preserve both Mary and Joseph, to allow them to be brought together at the right time. Consider even the lineage of both Mary and Joseph. Both Mary and Joseph came from the family of David, meaning that Jesus had legal status from David through Joseph, and physical status through Mary. The providence necessary to keep the line going, even after deportations to Babylon, attacks by the Greeks, conquered by the Romans – in all of this, God kept the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, David going to fulfil the prophecies.

Consider the amazing timing and wisdom of the conception of Jesus. We know from Matthew 1 and Luke 1 that Mary and Joseph were betrothed when she conceived by the Holy Spirit. Now the timing here was crucial. Jesus had to be conceived after Mary and Joseph were betrothed; otherwise it would disqualify her for betrothal. The marriage would not even have been arranged if she had been found to be pregnant. But betrothal was taken very seriously in Jewish culture, such that breaking off the betrothal was considered a divorce. So while it had to happen after betrothal, it also had to happen before they were actually married, so that there could be no controversy over who the child's father was. Matthew 1:18 says:

“Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. (Mat 1:18)

Consider also, how the Lord did this. He told Mary what was about to happen to her, but He did not tell Joseph. When Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant, he naturally suspects she has been immoral. Matthew 1:19 records the gracious and forgiving heart of Joseph:

“And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.” (Mat 1:19)

Now why did God allow a situation which obviously caused a lot of pain for young Joseph and Mary? Well, consider that by doing so, God upheld the validity of the virgin birth. It was essential for Joseph to know nothing about the miracle in her womb, so that his reaction would underline the fact that he was not the father. If both Mary and Joseph had been warned in a dream, there would have been cause for suspicion. People may have said, “Oh, you both had a dream saying this is a virgin birth. How convenient!” But God allowed Joseph to react in that way, so that the virgin birth was upheld, and afterward informed him of the true nature of Mary's pregnancy. The marvel of God's timing!

Then look at the timing of the Roman census. “And it came to pass in those days *that* a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city

of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. So it was that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered:

And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luk 2:1-7)

Now here is the incredible timing of God at work. A pagan emperor orders a census. Through God, providentially overseeing the lineage of Joseph, it meant that he had to go to Bethlehem. And, while I'm sure Mary and Joseph were probably planning on the birth happening in Nazareth, God had other plans. God causes Mary's body to come to full term just at the time they are in Bethlehem. Who knows the chances of getting that right – the length of the journey from Nazareth, the census being declared at this specific time in Mary's pregnancy – the factors are almost innumerable. Why? To fulfil an ancient prophesy:

Micah 5:2: "'But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting."

In fact, Jesus' birth in Bethlehem was unknown to many Jews, who assumed He had been born in Nazareth

"Others said, 'This is the Christ.' But some said, 'Will the Christ come out of Galilee? 'Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the seed of David and from the town of Bethlehem, where David was?'" (Joh 7:41-42)

In the fullness of time – God sent forth His Son.

And then, look at the birth of Christ. Why did God allow Mary and Joseph to arrive at a time when all the inns were full? Well, perhaps so that the very Bread of Life should be placed in a feeding trough, perhaps so that the Lamb of God should be in a stable at His birth. The artistry and genius of God shines in that humble stable.

Consider the timing of the shepherds being out with their flocks when the angels shone around.

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them:

"Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. "And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger."

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: *"Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"*

So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, *"Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us."* And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen *Him*, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all those who heard *it* marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

(Luk 2:8-20)

God has always had a special place in his heart for shepherds. It is probably likely that these shepherds watched over flocks destined for the sacrificial service in the nearby temple in Jerusalem. Here they are, the first recipients of the news that the final sacrifice has arrived.

When we speak of God's providential timing of His Son's birth, an incident a few days later highlights this as well. We read in Luke 2:25-38: And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said: "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, According to Your word; For my eyes have seen Your salvation Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of Your people Israel." And Joseph and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him. Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against "(yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

(Luk 2:25-38)

Here you have Simeon, an aged man, who has been told that he will see the Messiah before he dies. Well, at the exact day that Mary and Joseph are coming to the Temple to dedicate Jesus back to God, Simeon is led by the Spirit to go in as well. God's timing is to the minute. And then regarding Anna, the Bible says, *'coming in that instant'*. Down to the very moment God timed these two meetings.

A final look at God's amazing timing comes in the form of the Magi – the wise men that visited Christ.

"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him." (Mat 2:1-2)

Firstly, consider that these Gentiles must have had some form of prophecy or teaching about the King of the Jews for them to have come at all. God must have placed something in their writings that predicted the coming of Messiah. Perhaps they simply read Daniel and inferred some things. Consider also how God had no doubt allowed their various pagan interpretations of the stars to coincide with what He was doing with the star of Bethlehem. Just imagine the timing of when that star appeared, to cause all the human machinery in that country to eventually send them on a long journey. Consider how long that journey must have been, and yet the timing remained impeccable. The star brought them to Jerusalem first, where a more public announcement was made. The capital city of Israel now knew that the Messiah had been born. All the timing involved to eventually lead them to the house in Bethlehem where Mary and Joseph were is amazing.

What do these facts about the fullness of time teach us?

1) God is always on schedule

God is not in a hurry. God is not lagging behind, or trying to catch up, or frantic to get things done on time. God is never early. God is never late. God is precisely on time - his time. God sets the schedule, and meets it, regardless of the cooperation or non-cooperation of man. The birth of Jesus in the fullness of time was done on the heels of four pagan kingdoms who did not know God, yet God guided them and their civilisations to suit His purposes. The heathen may rage, but God sets His king on His holy hill of Zion. God remains exactly on schedule for our lives. We are told to redeem the time, and make use of every opportunity. God will never be late or early with His plans for our lives.

2) God is faithful to keep his promises

God promised Israel through the prophets that He would send His Messiah. By the time of Jesus, there was high expectancy for a Messiah. And God did not fail. At the right time, He sent His Son. It was in light of this that Mary praised God for His faithfulness in remembering His people:

"He has filled the hungry with good things, And the rich He has sent away empty. He has helped His servant Israel, In remembrance of His mercy, (Luk 1:53-54)

3) No matter what man may do, God will work all things according to His will.

When you consider all the attacks that the Jewish people faced, when you consider all the opposition from wicked and evil men, it is amazing to think that God accomplished the perfectly timed arrival of His Son apart from the purposeful cooperation of men. God will get the glory and work all things after the counsel of His will, with or without us realising that we are playing a part, either as a vessel of honour, or as a vessel of dishonour.

Christmas is not a time to waste our breath on pointless arguments about the exact date Jesus was born. It is a time to reflect on the incredible providence of God in

bringing His Son into the world at the perfect time. It is a time to reflect on the grace of God – that this event should happen at all.