



Back to God Hour

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Memorial Library

**CHRISTMAS
WHEN AND WHERE?**

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CHRISTMAS—WHEN AND WHERE?

But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

Galatians 4:4,5

December 17, 1939...the first broadcast of The Back to God Hour. For just a moment now, on this fortieth anniversary broadcast, we pause to look back and express thanksgiving to God for the work He has given many of us the privilege of performing. Over the years hundreds of people have been involved in the regular work that must be done if many broadcasts are to be prepared each week and if support literature is also to be made available. The administration of a broadcast ministry like this, which includes programs in other languages besides English, and television as well, is complex and time consuming. And along with those on the regular staff, many members of The Back to God Hour Committee of the Christian Reformed Church have given untold hours of time to this outreach.

If the band of men and women who have worked directly in this ministry is very large, those who have supported this work with their gifts and prayers form a virtual multitude. They are from many denominational persuasions; they are from many countries. It is staggering to think about this vast, worldwide body of dedicated people who literally carry the weight of this ministry on their shoulders. Sometimes those of us who have been close to this ministry have been almost puzzled by the advances which have been made, as the work has grown to include ministries in Arabic, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Indonesian, Chinese, and Japanese. Even now there are new developments on the horizon that are nearly frightening in their magnitude. But when we are perplexed by what has happened and by what is happening, we remember that deeply committed, intensely interested, and faithfully praying multitude. The Back to God Hour has been and is a very "prayed for" broadcast ministry. And so today

we commemorate forty years of this heartwarming attention.

But the multitude that has been touched by this ministry, this is the most enormous of all. We think of those who have been saved and look forward to the day when we will be with them in the eternal home. We know there will be many there who will be able to trace their earthly journey back to a day when God spoke to them through a broadcast of The Back to God Hour, or through a printed pamphlet sent from one of our offices. We know there will be many because of the testimonies that come from letters we receive. But that is not the real reason for our certainty.

We know there will be many because the broadcasts of The Back to God Hour have conveyed the message of the cross. In his message for the twenty-fifth anniversary of The Back to God Hour, Dr. Peter Eldersveld, speaker on the program for nearly twenty years, spoke of the message of the cross. He said:

Christ did not come here merely to live and to teach, to give us an example, to demonstrate goodness. He came here to die for human sin, and thus to seek and to save that which was lost. He said so Himself: "The Son of Man is come to give His life a ransom for many." He came to purchase our salvation at the cost of His own blood—not to show us how we can save ourselves, but to save us because we cannot save ourselves.

That's what God means when He calls to us from the cross and says: "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is none else."

Within the multitude which has been touched and transformed by The Back to God Hour ministries are countless numbers too whose eyes have been opened, and they have seen more of the fullness of the gospel message and the richness of its application to our lives. For The Back to God Hour stands in the Reformed tradition, it represents the historic Christian faith, and this tradition and this faith is rich with the fruits that have resulted from the application of

the gospel to all of life. The Back to God Hour ministries tell of God's salvation which includes a world-and-life view, a view that leaves no area of human activity untouched. There has been, therefore, a consistent emphasis on the importance of Christian education throughout the years, and there have been Christian schools formed because from The Back to God Hour someone received the vision of Christ's importance for education.

There are many more things I could say about this occasion, but I will say no more, for the primary task of this program is to bring the gospel in its fullness, not to reminisce. But before turning to that joyous task, I must not neglect to express appreciation to the many broadcasters who have carried our programs. We think of the deep interest which those who have Christian stations express in this ministry both in this country and overseas. Thank you, brothers and sisters. And we think of the many commercial broadcasters who have not only carried the broadcasts, but who have spoken a word of encouragement. And I think that I detect a greater willingness among them to carry broadcasts that are hard-hitting, aimed at specific social evils. They know that they have a responsibility to speak to the corruption of our time, and they apparently are willing to have us do exactly that on their station. Many, many thanks to them as well. Without people like you, there never would have been these forty years.

There are, of course, more important anniversaries than fortieth anniversaries, even when the fortieth anniversary is that of a gospel broadcast. And it is important to remind one another that this celebration of ours is occurring at a time when another anniversary is being celebrated worldwide. I am thinking of the anniversary of Jesus' birth.

There are many differences between these two anniversaries, and one of them is certainly this: Though we know exactly when this broadcast began, it is impossible to establish with accuracy when Jesus was born, and this means that there is something very imprecise about this worldwide celebration. When was Jesus born? Well, we say, "On the 25th of December," and then we add, "but really that's just one

date chosen from among other possibilities."

Indeed. And we would have to admit that there are some embarrassing aspects of our choice of this season and of the 25th day of the month, for it can be shown that what we now do each year to celebrate Jesus' coming is a bit too closely associated with the pagan celebrations of Saturnalia. For this very reason I occasionally receive long publications that criticize me severely for going along with the Christmas celebration. And when I read them, I must confess that I feel a twinge of uneasiness. But then I remember that when it comes to the time of Jesus' birth, it's not really all that important that we know exactly when He was born, that is, in terms of date. And we should certainly devote part of the year to thinking about the fact that the only begotten Son of God entered our race and became one of us, shouldn't we? So why not do it now, when everyone else is celebrating? If we want to talk about the time of Jesus' coming into the world, let's talk about something more important than the exact date of His birth.

There is a "when" of Jesus' birth that is infinitely more important than the date of His birth. The book of Galatians talks about this "when" in the fourth chapter where we read this important sentence which I want to discuss now for a little while. This is the sentence: "But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (vv. 4,5). The short phrase that is important for those who are interested in exactly when Jesus was born is the phrase "when the time had fully come." Or as we say sometimes, Jesus was born in the fullness of time.

When was Jesus born? Well, let's think about this *fullness of time* idea. When we do, I think that it is good to begin very simply, by thinking of the relation of time to conception and birth. I was impressed with this again the other day when I met with a pro-life group in a midwestern city, and they showed me the models they had made which depicted the growth of an unborn child in its mother's womb. They were beautifully done, and they dramatically portrayed

the various stages of development through which a fetus passes. This pro-life group used these models to show mothers what their unborn baby looked like; they felt that if a mother would actually know how developed her child was at sixteen weeks, let's say, she would understand how wrong it was to destroy this child. In any case, there is a growth in the womb of the mother that once started, barring accident, progresses until the time comes for the child to be born. I believe that there is an allusion to this reality in the sentence from Galatians which speaks of God sending His Son to be born of woman.

But sensitive students of the Bible are quick to point out that the *fullness of time* idea has a much broader reference in the book of Galatians. The Bible here refers to God's total control of all of human history and to His careful arrangement of the circumstances and the conditions in the world so that there finally would come a time when He Himself, in the person of His only begotten Son, would enter human history and become a Man. The Bible here invites us to view all the centuries that went before the birth of Jesus as if they formed the great universal womb out of which the Christchild was born. Jesus was not only born from His mother's womb, but He was born from a womb which God had made, using all the ages, using all history, using all the nations.

If you are troubled by the fact that we do not know the exact calendar date of Jesus' birth, don't worry about that. Instead be extremely happy as you remind yourself that we know exactly when Jesus was born. He was not born a day sooner or later than that precise time when God determined that everything was ready for His entrance into our world. He was not born a day earlier or later than the precise time which God had determined was the time when it was absolutely necessary for the Savior to be born.

Timing is one of the most important elements of our lives. If a young man asks a girl to marry him too early, she will refuse; if he asks her too late, she will too. Timing, young man, is important. I could talk about timing in connection with home life, in connection with foreign affairs and national defense.

The difference between failure and success is more often than not related to timing.

When Jesus was born God had prepared all the nations and had brought them to the point where they could receive Him. The development of the unborn Jesus in the womb of His mother was a small counterpart of the intricate and massive development of the human story from the beginning of time to the day of His birth, a development which made His birth absolutely sure and necessary. And thus, you see, we do know when Jesus was born. We know exactly. He was born at exactly the time God had providentially arranged.

I would like to say more about this *fullness of time* idea, and in order to do that I would like to move now from the question of when Jesus was born to the place where He was born; when we understand where He was born, we will understand even better when He was born. I hope I am not confusing you, but really this is all very fascinating, because when Jesus was born is very closely related to where He was born. And you know exactly where He was born, don't you?

If you have known the Christmas story for a long time, I suppose you would reply, "Of course, I know where Jesus was born. He was born in Bethlehem. In fact, He was born in a stable, in a manger . . . a barn where they had cows and donkeys and straw." Well, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and that is important; some of the prophecies of the Old Testament point forward to His birth in that city. But that isn't really where Jesus was born. At least that is not where He was born according to the sentence we have been looking at in the book of Galatians.

This sentence says that when the time had fully come God sent His Son who was born of a woman and who was born under the law. If we look at that sentence and ask "Where was Jesus born?" the answer it gives is that He was born "under the law." That is more important than the fact that He was born in Bethlehem. And the reason the fact that Jesus was born under the law is so important is this: He was born under the law "to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as

sons."

Now, there is so much here, that I cannot possibly convey all there is to think about in connection with the ideas we meet in Galatians 4:4,5, so what I want to do is to bring all this together so that all of us can understand why it is important for us to know when and where Jesus was born. Remember, we have noticed already that Jesus was born when the time had fully come, and now we have observed that He was born under the law.

When Jesus was born, all the people of the world were under the law. Especially the people of Israel were under the law, for they had received God's holy law directly from Him at Mt. Sinai. But not only were they under the law; other nations had their counterparts of the law, too. And even if they didn't have, they were judged either in terms of the laws which Israel had received if they knew these laws or in terms of the laws which they had made (Romans 2:12). The impression that we get from Galatians 4 is that the whole world during the time before Christ was in a state of childhood, or of adolescence. And during that time, it had to be governed by rigid religious laws. We read: "So with us; when we were children, we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe" (Galatians 4:3).

Among the people of Israel, who were Jesus' brothers according to the flesh, the burden of the law was especially distressing. In addition to the good laws of God, recorded in Moses' writings, the religious leaders had created a host of other laws and they told the people that their salvation depended on whether or not they obeyed these laws. For many, life was a hopeless burden. Everything they did was the object of intense scrutiny by the religious leaders. Religious supermen enjoyed heaping up mountains of merit by their careful obedience to the law, and such people developed a hypocrisy that sent its stench to high heaven.

The joyfilled message of Galatians 4:4,5 is this: Jesus Christ was born right there where the law fell with its crushing burden on human life, and He bore its awesome weight fully, so that from now on no one has to be crushed by the law again.

It is as if when Jesus Christ was born, He came striding into a mammoth prison in which all humanity was serving out its sentence; and coming to the gates, He tore them down; then coming to the cells, He flung them all open, and He set the prisoners free. And then He went into their cells, and He served their time. He went right into the dismal death row, and He sat down in the electric chair and paid the price for those poor condemned criminals.

Jesus was born when God looked down on the human race and saw them wrestling with their sin, and He said:

They have done this long enough. Now it is time to send my Son. Now. Right now. But when I send Him, I am not going to let Him sit high on a cloud so that everyone can see how different He is from them, but I am going to send Him to be born of a woman; I am going to send Him right into their world, and I am going to lay all the burden of their sin on Him.

When was Jesus born? He was born when the time came for God to do that. Where was He born? He was born right in the center of our lives, right in the place where we feel the most agony, the place where we ask what we will ever do to be clean and pure and worthy of eternal life. Right there. That's where He was born. And He was born there so that He could take our sins on Himself and give us the glorious experience of being truly the full-grown sons of God.

Notice the first seven verses of Galatians 4, and you will see that what we have been discussing is exactly what God says in this chapter:

I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no better than a slave, though he is the owner of all the estate; but he is under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; when we were children, we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe. But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts,

crying, "Abba! Father!" So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir.

In Galatians 4, Paul is talking about the law as a fierce teacher of sin that can lead people to despair if they try to earn their salvation by keeping it perfectly. Elsewhere, Paul says "the power of sin is the law" (1 Corinthians 15:56). Often the Bible speaks of other aspects of the law; the law has a good role too. But in Galatians the Bible has in view the misery that can come when people try to earn their salvation through the works of the law. And it tells us that Jesus came to fulfill the law perfectly and to pay the penalty of sin so that you and I can be free to call God our Father.

When was Jesus born? He was born in the fullness of time. Where was He born? He was born under the law. Let's take just a moment now to return once more to the idea of time, and of timing. Jesus came at a special time. And those of us who are in broadcasting cannot help but feel that Jesus also arranged that human beings would discover the tools to create electronic communication for just such a time as the time in which we are living, when there are so many billions of people to be reached with the good news of salvation. Surely, there can be no doubt that the God who so entirely and perfectly controlled the history of the world and arranged that His Son would be born at precisely the right time is still in control. And surely the God who was so interested in communication that He used His only begotten Son to accomplish communicating with us, surely He has arranged that the good news of Jesus Christ can be carried now around the world in a split second by electromagnetic radio waves.

And finally, it is important for each of us to examine our own lives and remind one another that our lives too are not careening out of control. But God is continuously directing them and taking up our actions into the great complex of the events of our age, still continuing to bring all things to another full time when Jesus Christ will come again. And part of the drama of many of our lives is that there comes a time too when God comes to us, and He confronts us with

the greatness of His being and the fullness of His salvation.

This is happening to you at this very moment. God has carefully brought you to this point, and He has used one of His imperfect servants to tell you about the great salvation Jesus has made a reality. Let there be no mistake: Jesus who was born under the law could free us from the bondage of sin only by paying the supreme penalty Himself. He did this on the cross. He died and rose again so that you could become a full-fledged child of God. Not a child of God who has to be led around by some teacher, but a child of God who has the Holy Spirit in his heart.

I know that what I have talked with you about today has been complicated; I'm sorry. But what you have heard is the Bible's true message. And what it all comes down to is this: God comes to you at this moment, and He invites you to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Believe that He is the Son of God, and confess your sins and ask Him for the salvation He provides. Trust in Him. Surrender to Him. Don't wait another moment. Don't wait another day. Now is the time for you to be saved.

PRAYER

Lord, we thank you that we may celebrate forty years of gospel proclamation on this broadcast. We pray that you will confirm and strengthen the faith of many who have heard your message over these programs.

But more than this, we are thankful today that we may celebrate the anniversary of your Son's birth into our world. We are so grateful that He was born just when He was. We are grateful that He came to take our place—that He was born under the law so that we could be redeemed from bondage.

Now, Lord, penetrate many hearts and help many people see how much they need this great Savior. Make this very moment the exact moment when hearts are opened to the full force of your gospel. Change lives through the power of your Holy Spirit, and make millions of people into your sons and daughters.

In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

The message printed in this pamphlet was heard over the Back to God Hour, which is broadcast every Sunday in co-operation with the Christian Reformed Churches of America, in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia, and by shortwave throughout the world.

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