

In the  
Fullness of *Time*





# Introduction

Some things are so beautiful, immense, complex, transcendent, and compelling that naturally curious minds turn away from the trivial in order to marvel, sometimes with reverence and silent awe. This is not the gaze of the casual onlooker who rarely gives a moment's thought to anything beyond current fashion, social connectivity, hedonistic pleasures, or self-interest. We can only feel sorry for the person who would rather visit an art museum to see a painting of a rose than go into a garden to enjoy the beauty of a living rose. (Pascal: "How vain painting is, exciting admiration by its resemblance to things of which we do not admire the originals"). Anyone who has ever seen *Dead Poets Society* is overjoyed when English teacher John Keating (Robin



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Williams) demands that all of his students tear out the introductory pages of their textbooks containing the author's commentary. His consuming passion is that they discover their own thoughts and voices, to learn to think for themselves rather than to uncritically embrace the opinions of others. Keating's eyes have already been opened to the cardinal virtues in the universe - beauty, goodness, and truth. So he takes extreme measures to ensure that his students do not get stifled by the mediocrity and group-think of the day. The school authorities, however, will have none of it. They demand conformity. Pascal again: "Being unable to cure death, wretchedness, and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things."



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The rewards which come to those who pursue substance over the trivial are immensely satisfying. They include joy, insight, wisdom, and accumulated knowledge. But the ultimate satisfaction is the knowledge of the Holy. It is having a sense of “creature-consciousness,” being overwhelmed by our “own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures.” Upon meeting God through Christ, we are “left in a stupor, signifying blank wonder, an astonishment that strikes us dumb, amazement absolute” (Rudolph Otto). For He is mysterious and unexplained, incomprehensible, “beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar...filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment.”





# Introduction

Of course, there are many things beyond our apprehension and comprehension, “not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently ‘wholly other,’ whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb” (Otto).

Making Christmas trivial, then, removes the mystery and majesty of the incarnation of Jesus Christ while robbing hungry souls of the anticipated happiness sought for in gifts, parties, trees, lights, meals, movies, and the music of the season. The God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person, after all, can only be filled with God Himself.

# Introduction

The intent of this lecture is to lift our eyes and hearts heavenward to consider seven brief words from Paul's letter to the Galatians which have the power to give us a more noble, majestic understanding of the Incarnation and help us in our worship the Holy One of Israel: "When the fullness of the time came." These words provide an overview of God's sovereign plan to send His only begotten Son into the world to redeem lost sinners. By pondering the significance of this revelation, we are not only thinking about the baby Jesus in a manger; we are considering the creation of time and space "in the beginning," human history, the ripeness of time, and how everything is working together to accomplish God eternal decrees for the entire universe. In short, we are considering the meaning of the word *mystery*.



# Introduction

What is *mystery*? “In the Bible, mystery designates the content of God’s good news (Eph. 6:19) that focuses on Christ (Col. 2:2) as eternally decreed (1 Cor. 2:7), yet veiled to human understanding awaiting supernatural disclosure (1 Cor. 2:8; Rom. 8:25) in a historical manifestation (Eph. 1:9; 3:3-4) in the **‘fullness of the time’ (Gal. 4:4)**. The mysterious wisdom of God was prepared before the creation (1 Cor. 2:7) and was hidden in God (Eph. 3:9), and hidden from the ages (1 Cor. 2:8; Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:26; Rom. 16:25). But the times reach their terminus in the revelation that the creation and consummation of the world are comprised in the eternal Christ become flesh” (Henry). Let us, then, consider what Paul meant when He wrote these penetrating words.

# The Sublime Mystery of Christmas

“When the fullness of the time  
came, God sent forth His Son.”

Galatians 4:4





# Galatians 4:4-5

- “But **when the fullness of the time came**, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons” (NASV).
- “But **when the fullness of time had 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” (ESV).
- “But **when the right time came**, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children” (NLT).

# *Time:* Two Greek Words

**CHRONOS**

(Quantity of Time)

&

**KAIROS**

(Quality of Time)





# English Derivatives of *Chronos*

- **Chronometer:** instrument for measuring time
- **Chronological:** arranged in the order of time
- **Chronology:** assigning events to correct dates
- **Synchronize:** to cause to coincide in time
- **Chronography:** the description of past time
- **Chronical:** pertaining to time
- **Chronic:** lasting a long time
- **Anachronism:** erroneous reference to a wrong date



**Royal Observatory, Greenwich, London**

Greenwich Mean Time or GMT is clock time. It is the same all year round and is not affected by Summer Time (Daylight Saving Time) clock changes.



# The Meaning of *Chronos*

- **Chronos:** *time*, mostly in the sense of “a period (or span) of time, that to which a specific event belongs” (Kittel).
- Trench defines *chronos* as “the succession of moments.” It is the duration over which the Church’s history should extend.
- According to Greek scholars H.G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *chronos* means “a definite time, a while, period, season.”
- “*Chronos* meant time viewed as a succession of linear moments in contrast to time as *kairos*, which meant time as the significance of a moment that is ripe with meaning and a potential for good or ill” (Os Guinness).
- *Chronos* appears 53 times in the N.T.



# Selected Texts with *Chronos*

- “Then Herod secretly called the magi, and ascertained from them the **time** the star appeared” (Mt. 2:7).
- “Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its environs, from two years old and under, according to the **time** which he had ascertained from the magi” (Mt. 2:16).
- “Now the **time** had come for Elizabeth to give birth, and she brought forth a son...” (Lk. 1:57).
- “And he led Him up and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of **time**” (Lk. 4:5).



# The Meaning of *Kairos*

- **Kairoi** are the joints or articulations in these times, the critical epoch-making periods foreordained of God (e.g., the Flood, Moses at Mt. Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, the reign of King David, the recognition of Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine, the Reformation, the Great Awakenings, the Second Coming of Christ, etc.).
- In *kairos*, the linguistic development of the term clearly suggests the basic sense is that of the “decisive or crucial place or point,” whether spatially, materially or temporally (Kittel).
- The temporal sense is that of a “decisive moment.” There is an emphasis on the fact that it is ordained by God.

# Selected Texts with *Kairos*

- “And behold, they cried out, saying, ‘What do we have to do with You, Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the **time**?’” (Mt. 8:29).
- “At that **time** Herod the tetrarch heard the news about Jesus” (Mt. 14:1).
- “The **time** is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand...” (Mk. 1:15).
- In Acts 1:6, the disciples asked Jesus, “Lord, is it at this **time** (chronos) You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus answered them, “It is not for you to know **times** (chronos) or **epochs** (kairos) which the Father has fixed by His own authority” (1:7).

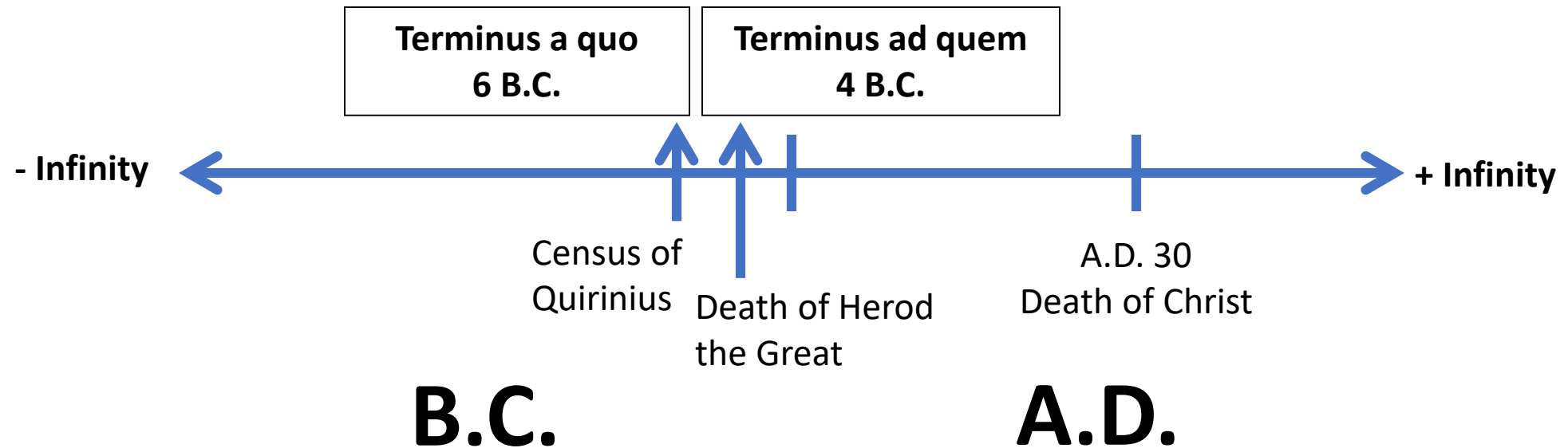


# Comparing *Chronos* & *Kairos*

- *Chronos*, then, denotes a stretch of time, but *kairos* a definite period that is **marked by what transpires in it** (Lenski).
- *Kairos* is “the right point of time, the proper time or season of action, the exact or critical time” (Liddell and Scott).
- **Chronos** embraces all possible *kairoi*, and, being the larger, is the more inclusive term (Trench).
- “*Chronos* points to a longer duration of time; *kairos* points to a definitely limited moment of time” (Ridderbos).
- It is possible to speak of *kairos chronou*, but not of the *chronos kairou*.



# The Birth of Jesus Christ



- **Terminus a quo**, *term from which*; also used specifically in dating to indicate the starting-point of a period (OED). The ***earliest possible date*** of a non-punctual event, era, period, etc.
- **Terminus ad quem**, *term to which*; used to indicate the finishing- point of a period (OED). The ***latest possible date*** of a non-punctual event, era, period, etc.



# Time Runs Out

Galatians 4:4 speaks of the end of the period of bondage under the Law. “This period of time is now spoken of as *the fullness of time*, that is to say, the moment in which the previously determined time-limit was reached. Beneath this thought lies the assumption that the time runs out according to a fixed plan, that time, in short is governed” (Ridderbos).



# *Fullness* Explained

“According to some, the *pleroma* is used here in the active sense: ‘that which fills’ (so Burton). Generally, however, it has a passive sense: that which has been completed, the fulfilled. This passive meaning suits the context well. The picture is that of a vessel that is being poured full and at a given moment is brimful. The *pleroma* is not merely that last bit that fills the vessel but the whole brimful content of the container.”



# Images of Fullness

- In eating (one is satisfied)
- In having children (the quiver is full)
- In power (complete or ample measure)
- In traveling (time to return home)
- In sailing (full sail)
- In a theater (all seats are taken)
- In a parking lot (no vacant spaces)
- In knowledge (exhaustiveness)





# Dr. Gerhard van Groningen

“The complete expression of God’s redemptive purposes and the outworking of these have come to mankind in the person, teaching, and deeds of Jesus Christ. In the “fulness of time” (Gal. 4:4) he sealed and validated the redemption God had planned for mankind and applied to believers *before, at, and after* the time of his sojourn on earth within the course of world history.”



**Gerhard van Groningen**

1921-2014

Old Testament Scholar



## R.C. Sproul on “Pleroma”

“Scripture declares that Jesus was born in the ‘fullness of time.’ The word that is translated ‘fullness’ is the Greek word *pleroma*. The English word *fullness* does not quite capture the meaning of this word. *Pleroma* refers to a fullness that is absolute, a fullness that reaches its bursting point. When we fill a glass of water, we do not fill it to the rim. A small, empty space is left lest we spill the contents when we lift the glass to drink. The fullness of *pleroma* would be more like what happens when we put the glass under a spigot and turn on the water and let it run. The glass fills up and then begins to spill over the side. In this case there is not room left in the glass for any more water.



## R.C. Sproul on “Pleroma”

“The ‘fullness of time’ means that **history was ripe for the birth of Christ**. All of the *chronos* of the past and all of the *kairoi* that had gone before converged in this moment. **Jesus was born at the precise second and in the precise place that God had ordained from the foundation of the world**. Luke records it with these words: ‘So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered.’ But it was not only the days of Mary’s pregnancy, the normal period of gestation, that was completed. **It was the years, centuries, and millennia that had been completed in preparation for this moment.**”

# The World Stage Was Prepared

## 1. Political Unity

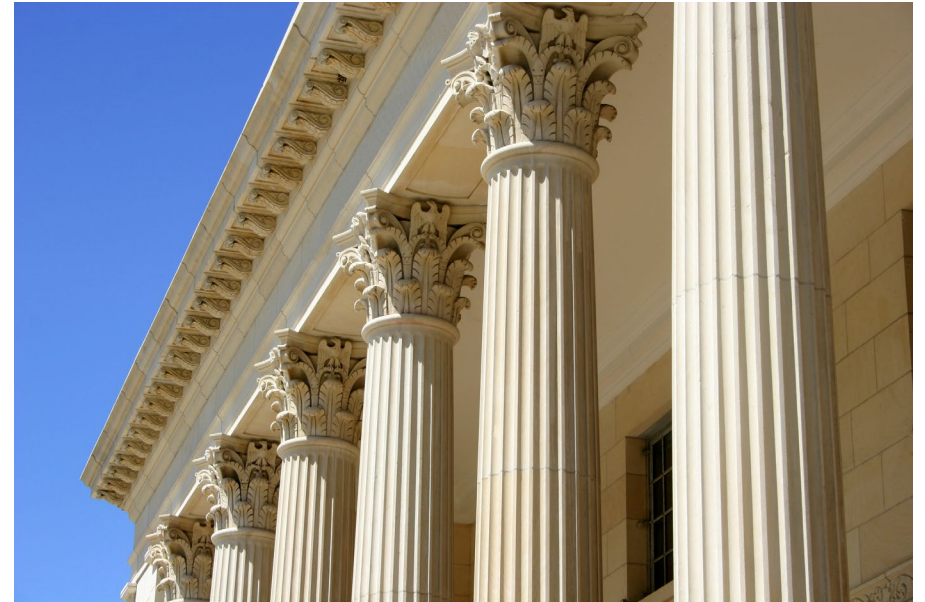
- Augustus built on the work of Julius Caesar, creating the Roman Empire.
- Pax Romana (the peace of Rome); there had been war, civil war, civil strife, and piracy.
- The practical unification of the whole world.
- The establishment of law and order.



# The World Stage Was Prepared

## 2. The Spread of the Greek Language

- After Philip of Macedon was assassinated in 323 B.C., he was succeeded by his 20-year-old son, Alexander. After only 13 years, Alexander the Great had conquered virtually all of the civilized world.
- After his death, the various cultures of the ancient world began to congeal. The officials in most of the major states were Greeks, and Greek became the universal language of government and business.
- Cicero said that “Greek is read in almost all nations.”





# The World Stage Was Prepared

## 2. The Spread of the Greek Language (cont.)

- “Important and far-reaching consequences followed when Alexander adopted Greek as a universal language throughout the empire...It can with truth be said that Alexander paved the way for Christianity; without his spade-work, its preachers would have made slower headway in western Europe” (Agnes Savill).
- Under the protection of Roman law, the Apostles could travel everywhere and make themselves understood through the Greek language in every city of the Roman domain.



# The World Stage Was Prepared

## 3. Growth of Roads and Commerce

- Roads to Spain and Britain in the west
- Roads to Persia and India in the east
- Broad, well-built highways were constructed over rivers, mountains, and deserts
- Security of travel
- Suppression of piracy
- Facilitated movement of groups, individuals, and ideas







# The World Stage Was Prepared

## **4. Roman rule was indifferent to most religious groups and ideas**

- Extensive interchange of ideas
- Cultural unity: Alexander the Great

## **5. Dark picture in heathenism**

- Gladiators/beasts: 20,000 died each month
- Stoicism: a cold and self-centered belief; flattered men's pride
- Epicureanism: appealed to man's sensualism
- Sanctity of marriage had ceased
- Abortion and exposure and murder of newly born children were common
- 1,000 harlots were kept at public expense at Venus' temple in Athens



# The Moment of the Pleroma

“We can ask ourselves to what extent we are also to think in this connection of a process of development taking place in time, in preparation for what would happen in the fullness of time. Now it is true that God controls time and determines the moment of the pleroma. And this carries with it the implication that **the moment of the pleroma** (fullness of time) was the most suitable for what was now about to happen. But no emphasis is put upon this aspect of the matter. Nor can we prove on convincing grounds why this time was the most suitable for the coming of Christ. In any event, these words lend no support for the view that the development of time should be able to explain the advent of the Son. This advent does not have its motif in



# The Moment of the Pleroma

what works and ferments in time. It has its motif in what God disposes and does – though this does not at all exclude the possibility of a preparation in time. When this moment, determined by the counsel of God had come, God sent His Son” (Ridderbos).

# William Hendriksen

“It is God alone who fully knows why, in his inscrutable decrees, he had decided that ‘the long period of time (chronos) in which all the preparatory events were to occur would run out at that specific moment. **It was then that he sent out from himself his Son.**”



# Responding to the Incarnation

“Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of the **time** in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.”

- I Peter 4:1-2

