

God's perfect timing

Galatians 4:4-7

Do you know the name of the type of set up we've just seen?

It's called a *Rube Goldberg Machine*,
a series of steps and components, one running into another,
carrying energy in a variety of forms
from the turn of the newspaper page at the beginning
through to the swinging piece of toast at the end.

We saw a relatively simple one on the screen

but they can become quite complex.
They are clever, fascinating pieces of machinery,
and they remind me of what Paul has written here in Galatians 4:4-7.

When Jesus arrived in Bethlehem on that very first Christmas morning,

It was just one step in a series of co-ordinated moves,
whereby God was doing something remarkable.
Paul tells us that Jesus was born at just the right moment,
That he was a saviour with the right kind of origin,
That he made the right kind of entrance,
And that he achieved the right kind of result.

And so just like a Rube Goldberg Machine

has all the elements lined up for an astonishing effect,
so too the plan that God has enacted in Jesus Christ
sees a whole swag of elements coming together
to achieve something remarkable.

In the space of 4 verses, Paul gives us 6 different steps in God's plan of salvation,

just like a marble running along a track setting off different triggers,
so too God has moved through history
setting off different things at different times,
not least of all being the arrival of his Son.

So if our NT passage is like a Rube Goldberg machine,

Then what are the different elements that we have collected here?
Often with Rube Goldberg machines the action happens very quickly
and the same thing can be said for these verses here
We'll unpack each step a little bit slowly

Well, Paul begins by explaining how the first Christmas happened

when, verse 4, the set time had fully come.
Paul tells us that the timing of the first Christmas was no accident.
If Jesus had come earlier it would have been too soon,

if he had come later his arrival would have been needlessly delayed.
But roughly 2020 years ago, that was the right time.

What was it about *this* time that made it so special?
Frustratingly, Paul doesn't spell it out for us,
but I think we get a clue
from the rest what he writes in this letter to the Galatians.

Earlier on, in ch 3,
Paul speaks about what life was like for followers of God before Jesus.
Through Moses God had given his people a set of laws to follow.
These laws revealed what was important to God,
they were a reflection of God's own character,
and they showed how men and women were commanded to live
so as to reflect something of who God is.

But as people in OT tried to live this out,
it became apparent that there was a problem.
They just couldn't do it!
No matter how often they said "Yes! I'm going to turn over a new leaf!"
They just fell back into their old habits while God's commands went unmet.

So the laws in the OT teach us two things:
They teach us about God and his standards and character,
And they teach us about our inability to match him!

This year saw our family move house, we moved from Waitara to Asquith
Before we moved it was a nice flat walk from home here to church,
but after moving I realized that a valley exists
between our church here and our new home,
with the Hornsby creek running down the middle of it.

It's also been the year that I've turned 40.
Now sometimes people ask me "how does it feel to be forty?"
And sometimes I've said "no different to when I was in my 20s".
Let me tell you, walking down and up that valley to get to work
HAS REVEALED TO ME THAT I AM NO LONGER IN MY 20'S!!
There's nothing wrong with the valley,
it's part of the landscape that God has put here,
but it demonstrates that there is something wrong with me.

And so it is with the history of Israel.
For generation after generation,
the two lessons of God's holiness and of human sinfulness
were replayed again and again,
until finally our need of help had been sufficiently demonstrated.

And so how did that help arrive?

Paul continues by saying that it was at this right time
that a saviour arrived *from the right place*.

It was at *this time* that God sent his son, he says.

I'm not sure whether you saw this news from about a week ago,

where a woman had to be rescued
after falling down a mine shaft in outback NSW.

The 26 year old prospector went on evening stroll from her camp,
when she fell down a disused mineshaft in the dark.

She spent the night at the bottom of an 8 meter pit
with straight sides and no way to climb out.

Police discovered her when they were flying a drone over the area during
their search.

Then, of course, they themselves went down the shaft to pull her out.

If she was left to her own devices, then she's still be at the bottom of the pit.

What her rescue required was outside assistance,
first in the form of the drone, and second in the form of the cops themselves.

And when it comes to help that we need,

the help we need as people who've failed to live up to God's standards,
then that help also needs to come from the outside,
because try as we might we're not going to overcome this issue on our own.
And so God sent his Son.

God the Son existed well before that first Christmas day,

in fact he's existed for all eternity as a divine person,
as one who is able to do for us humans what we cannot do for ourselves.

Elsewhere in the Bible the Apostle Paul has written
that we humans are dead in our transgressions.

That is, our sins have extinguished within us every last spark of spiritual life.
We cannot resuscitate ourselves, and so God, the creator of life,
he had to come and breath new life into us.

But as Jesus came from this divine origin,

he had to make the right entrance, and so Paul says he was
born as a woman, born under the law.

If you know anything about the Christmas story

then you'll know that Jesus was born to Mary.

But in mentioning this Paul isn't just stating the obvious,
rather he's reminding us of a vital step in God's plan of salvation.

Saying that Jesus was born of a woman was Paul's shorthand way of emphasizing
that when Jesus arrived to save us he did so as a human, as one of us.

And not only did he share our physical experience
but he shared our spiritual experience as humans as well:
he was born under law—
born with the expectation that he live in obedience to God's commands.
The first Christmas witnessed something
that had never happened up until then and would never again happen since:
God himself merged with the human race, becoming one of us in everyway.

After Christmas comes Boxing Day, and Boxing Day is known for at least four things:
leftovers; the Boxing Day test match, sales, and new movies!
And when you go to the movies you'll see two figures merging together,
although if it's done well you might not recognize it.

Here's Johnny Depp with his stunt double from *Pirates of the Caribbean*,
The vast majority of well-known actors will make ample use of a stunt double,
A person who takes on the physical existence of the actor for themselves,
and who acts as the actor's substitute and representative.

When the scene calls for the actor to do something they can't do for themselves,
The stunt double steps in and performs the tricky maneuver.
[here's Andrew Garfield with his substitute from Spiderman]
And who gets the credit? The actor gets the credit,
it's as if they themselves have jumped off the burning building,
because for a moment the two have become one.

And so it is with Jesus becoming one of us.
God has come as one of us to achieve what we ourselves couldn't achieve.

And so what was the stunt?
What exactly was the tricky maneuver done on our behalf?
Jesus was born under law *to redeem those under law* Paul says in verse 5.
To redeem something is to pay a price for its release, to pay a ransom.
It's an image that Paul has borrowed from the ancient slave market,
In Paul's day a slave could find freedom if a big enough ransom was produced.

Paul is saying that our inability to fulfill God's law leaves us no better-off than slaves.
Earlier he says that we are *cursed* because of this situation.
Imagine a slave who's disappointed their master one too many times,
all that's left for that slave is the prospect of their master's anger,
maybe in the form of on-selling, maybe even death.
It's a horrendous picture; the slave needs to be redeemed from this scenario!

And so how can a slave come up with a fair price to secure their freedom?
Well, it's conceivable that if a substitute were to come along,
that might just do the trick and satisfy the ransom that's needed.
And so Jesus, taking on the role of a person subject to the law,

agreed to this exchange where he would buy the freedom of the cursed
by allowing the curse to fall upon him.

One of the delightful things about Rube Goldberg machines
is that the surprises keep coming.
You may think that redemption from the effects of our sin is the high point,
but Paul traces this chain of divine activity through to another stage.

Not only does God's action release us from our failings but it grants us a new status.
We are redeemed, Paul says, that we might receive adoption to sonship.
The contrast Paul uses to describe the result of Jesus entry into the world
is the contrast between Slaves and Sons.
Both of them were members of ancient households,
yet which one would you rather be?

Slaves had an uncertain future,
they knew their time was perhaps limited,
certainly there was no guarantee they would be heard if they had a complaint.

Compare that existence with a child of the household.
They are secure in their position,
Having a place for good within the home,
And children have the ears of their parents
with their parents even doing their bidding.
And Paul says that one of the results of this first Christmas
was that we might receive adoption as children of God.

And so in the space of just two verses,
Paul has followed God's actions through a series of aligned steps:
At the *right time*, Jesus was sent from the *right place*
and made the *right entrance* to achieve the *right result*:
redemption from our situation as lawbreakers
so that we might receive adoption as Children of God's household
with all the rights and privileges that this entails.

There's a lot to take in just the space of two verses, isn't it?
But that tends to be the way with Rube Goldberg Machines,
you can look at them for hours.
Here's a picture of a Rube Goldberg machine at Bus terminal in NYC.
They have a habit of capturing people's attention,
and when I find myself looking at one of these inventions
I find myself admiring the creator. *How clever! How perfectly executed!*
And the architect of our salvation is no less worthy of praise.
Perhaps that's what can mark our celebration of Christmas this year;
Praise for the one who has lined all this up for our benefit.
Let's praise him now with our final carol: ...