

## The First Noel | 18 December 2016 | Galatians 4:4-7

### Song: The First Noel, 1823

No other carol casts such a spell. The sweet, plaintive strains of “The First Noel,” quietly sung on a snow-clad Christmas Eve, bring tears to the eyes and gentle peace to the heart. *Noel, noel, noel, noel. Born is the King of Israel.* If only we knew who wrote it! It first appeared anonymously in *Some Ancient Christmas Carols*, published by Davis Gilbert in 1823, and the traditional music evidently came from an unknown source in the west of England.

The poetry itself is plain. If we were to recite this rather lengthy piece, we’d get only a garbled sense of the Christmas story. There’s no indication in Scripture, for example, that the shepherds saw the Magi’s star. And the final verse of the original carol seems anticlimactic. But when combined with its wistful music, the words glow and our hearts are strangely warmed. The word “Noel” seems to be a French word with Latin roots: **Natalis**, meaning birthday. Morgan, Then Sings My Soul, Book 2, page 61

### Text: Galatians 4:4-7

*But when the **fullness of time** had come... (4:4)*

**Fullness = *pleroma***

NIDNTT, Vol. 1

**Fullness, Abound, Multitude, Fulfill, Make Room.** The words grouped together under this heading cover a wide variety of ideas. They are connected by the thought, suggested by their etymologies, of occupying, filling and even overflowing a given space. However, in some instances context and usage supersede etymology... The noun ***pleroma*** means that which fills, fullness, fulfilling, and is also used as an eschatological technical term for the fullness of time and the fulfillment of the will of God. 728

NT - The fulfillment of time... According to Mk 1:15, Jesus’ first public preaching began with the words, “The time is fulfilled.” The time appointed by God and awaited by Israel has come. This may be compared with Jesus’ declaration in the synagogue at Nazareth after reading from Isa 61:1 f. (Lk 4:18 f.): “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:21). 737-738

In this connection, Paul makes use of the noun ***pleroma***: “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” (Gal 4:4 f.). This does not mean only that a particular time has expired, or that an appointed time has come. Rather, **it means that in the divine economy of salvation human time has reached its full measure.** In Eph 1:10 Paul links the ***oikonomia*** (House) with the ***pleroma*** (fullness) of times. He wishes to stress that the Christ-event does not lie in the realm of human factors and possibilities but in the counsel of God (vs 9). 738

TDNT, Vol. VI

Galatians 4:4 is not just saying that a divinely determined span of time has run its course or that a divinely ordained point has been reached. Gal 4:4 carries the concept of the fulfillment of time decisively beyond the Jewish view. With the sending of the Son time (cf. Eph 1:10) is fulfilled absolutely; it attains to its full measure in content as well as extent. The saying does not refer to the abolition of time but to the fact that God's saving work has come directly into history; [footnote #60: History as the setting of human life rather than that which man controls.] in the historical event of the earthly Jesus God accomplishes His eschatological act. This understanding of the *pleroma* statements is confirmed and elucidated by Eph. 1:10a. The pre-temporal resolve of God leads to the saving dispensation of the fulfillment of the times, in which the times are to be and have been fulfilled. The original decree of God had this fulfillment of the times in view. It is grounded solely in God's free will. 305

**Time = *chronos***

NIDNTT, Vol. 3

Time and eternity are two complementary categories for comprehending the historical process. The Greek language has a wealth of various terms with which to express the experience of time. The most extensive one is *aion* which is primarily a designation for a long period of time. When such an age refers to the past, it denotes remote antiquity, the dim and distant past; when it is directed to the on-going future *aion* can take on the meaning of eternity. Eternity is thus not necessarily a timeless concept, but the most comprehensive temporal one which the experience of time has produced. Theologically speaking, lasting time is a property of God the Creator, whereas passing time belongs to man as creature. *Chronon* chiefly denotes the quantitative, linear expanse of time, a space or period of time, and is thus a term of the formal and scientific conception of time... 826

In the NT *chronos* occurs 54 times (24 in the Lucan historical writings and 9 in Paul)... Like other temporal terms, *chronos* serves initially for the formal designation of a space or point of time... Theologically more significant than the general indications of time are those passages which speak of *chronos* in connexion with a specific event. Such passages occur particularly in the Lucan historical writings. Lk. 1:57 mentions the *chronos* of Elizabeth's delivery... The climax of the *chronos*-pronouncements is reached in a whole series of Christological statements. For with Jesus Christ, something new and unique has happened in time. Nevertheless, the NT writers are not interested in speculative questions about the origin and nature of time. Their thoughts centre on Jesus Christ who has given time and history a new significance. This is expressed by Paul in the following terms: "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" (Gal 4:4 f.). H. Schlier interprets the phrase ["the fullness of time"] as meaning "the moment in which the *chronos* [time] is complete, in which time (in the sense of the passing of time) reached its full measure, i.e. came to its end". 843

**Redeemed = *exagorase*** [Aorist Active Subjunctive 3 person, singular – *exagorazo*]; (vr 5)

**Exagorazo** is used with the special sense of “redeem” in Gal 3:13; 4:5, where the idea of escape from the consequences of breaking God’s law is added. NIDNTT, Vol. 1, 268

**Adoption – *hyiothesia*** (vr 5)

[A compound word – *hyios*, son and *thesia*, position.]

**Hyiothesia** occurs seldom (never in the LXX [Greek translation of the OT]). It is a technical legal term and means adoption, the accepting of a child as one’s own. 287

Paul takes the idea a stage further in that he understands sonship not just as a present condition but also as the goal of hope, still to be fulfilled (Rom 8:23; cf. also Jas 1:18; 1 Pet 1:23). Thus the concept takes on a peculiar double aspect. “On the one hand, it is a thing of the future, a longed-for goal (Rom 8:23; “we wait for the adoption as sons”); on the other hand, it is a present thing, as is attested by the fact that in the Spirit – that eschatological gift – we cry “*Abba!*” (Rom 8:15 f.; Gal 4:6 f.). 289

**Sent the Spirit = *exaposteilen to pneuma*** [Aorist Active Indicative 3 person singular – *exapostello*] (vs 6)

[NOTE: Our passage begins with 3:1-2, “Did you receive the **Spirit** by words of the law or by hearing with faith?”]

Gordon Fee, God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul, (Hendrickson, 1994).

Thus 4:1-7 serves as Paul’s “final conclusion.” By moving the Spirit back into the foreground, Paul brings the argument full circle. What began as an appeal to their experience of the Spirit as evidence that everything (righteousness, “sonship,” inheritance) is by faith in Christ—who has done away with Torah observance—is now concluded by indicating one specific and significant way in which they have experienced Spirit so as to demonstrate that reality. 400

As everywhere in Paul, evidenced most strikingly in the compact phrases of the benediction in 2 Cor 13:13-14, salvation is initiated by God, effected by Christ through his death on the cross, and appropriated by “participating in the Spirit (cf. Rom 5:1-5). 401

Christ’s death has redeemed (“freed”) people from such and brought them into “sonship,” confirmed by the indwelling Spirit of the Son, who cries out from within the believer in the language of the Son himself. Thus the Son has effected “adoption as sons,” establishing for believers a relationship with God much like his own, which in Rom 8:14-17 Paul will amplify as “joint-heirship.” 401

Paul also conjoins the work of Son and Spirit by his use of the (rare) designation, “the Spirit *of his Son*”—the same Son whom God had sent to redeem people. This precise language in fact occurs nowhere else, but it is quite in keeping with that of Rom 8:9 (“the Spirit of Christ”) and Phil 1:19 (“the Spirit of Jesus Christ”). These three passages, besides saying something significant in terms of Christology (it is no small thing that the Spirit *of God* can so easily also be called the Spirit *of Christ*), also say something significant about the Spirit (that the indwelling Spirit, whom believers know as an experienced reality, is the way both the Father and the Son are present in the believer’s life). 405

Paul's interest is to make sure that the Galatians understand who the Spirit is: none other than the Spirit of Christ—the same Christ who “loved [them] and gave himself for [them],” who now by his Spirit indwells them. But Paul's point goes even further. For the Spirit is not called “the Spirit of Christ” in that direct way, but “the Spirit of [God's] Son.” That is the linchpin. The same Son whose death effected redemption and secured “sonship” for them, now indwells them by his Spirit, “the Spirit of the Son,” whom God sent forth as he had the Son himself. The ultimate evidence of his “sonship” is their use of the Son's own address to the Father in prayer: *Abba*. Thus the “sonship” motif, that goes back as far as 3:7, is brought to its ringing climax with this sentence. 405

In sum: Paul's concern right along has had to do with Gentile believers as true “sons” of Abraham. That came about through the redemptive work of Abraham's one “seed,” Christ, who made it possible for all who trust in him to share in his inheritance as fellow “sons.” But beyond that, such “sons of Abraham” are “sons of God,” made so through Christ (vr 5). The evidence of such shared “sonship” is the presence of the Spirit of the Son, who by crying out “*Abba*” from within the believer, is his own distinctive term of address to God his Father. Thus: “Because you have received ‘sonship’ through Christ's redemption, God's confirmation of that for you experientially stems from his also having sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, evidenced by the fact that the Spirit of the Son cries out to God in the Son's own word of intimacy, ‘*Abba, Father.*’” 406

A final observation. With this text and its companion in Romans 8, we now have the third of Paul's primary images for the church, that of family (cf. 2 Cor 6:18). As with the prior two images of temple and body, the Spirit is the essential ingredient of the imagery. As members of God's family, through the work of the Son, by whom we have become heirs together of God's own glory, God is “Father” and we are “brothers and sisters.” The Spirit of the Son whom God has sent into our hearts creates God's new temple; it is through our common lavish experience of the Spirit that we are formed into one body; and now it is the Spirit within who gives evidence that we are members of God's family. 412