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## **“But When the Fullness of Time Came...” (Galatians 4, 4). The Fullness of Time - the Implementation of God’s Eternal Plan to Save the World**

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### **Abstract**

This study focuses on a subject that presents one of the most important promises made by God and recorded in the Book of Genesis 3,15. The hope of coming of the promised Savior can be observed constantly throughout the life of the Biblical Israel, and is seen as a red thread throughout history, until He appears to the world as the Son of God Incarnate.

Considering the importance of the issue, I acknowledged necessary to enlarge upon the research, focusing on three objectives: a) The fall into sin and the necessity of the Incarnation, b) The era previous to the “fullness of time”, c) The soteriological significance of the Incarnation.

In the steps taken, we have emphasized that the Mystery of the kenosis is closely related to the mystery of our salvation. The Incarnation of the Savior is the center of history, marks the end of an era and at the same time, the beginning of another. The fulfillment of the promise of salvation by sending the Son of God in the world is the temporal center of all other events in the history of salvation.

### **Keywords:**

Incarnation, salvation, fullness of time, revelation, sin, grace

## I. Introduction

The phrase "the fullness of time - τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου" (Galatians 4, 4) used by the Apostle Paul in the Epistle to the Galatians is meant to announce the moment of the Incarnation of the Son of God, a time awaited by all humankind and promised by God to the first men, being recorded in the Holy Scripture by the words, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel"(Genesis 3,15). This moment marks the beginning of the history of the human race salvation, and this moment will anchor the hope of all humankind. Moreover, the teaching in which God the Man is centrality will become the foundation upon which the whole life of the Church will be based. The Son of God the Incarnate is the summing up of the whole Divine Revelation, He is "the key to self-understanding of man and of history of humankind"<sup>1</sup>.

## II. Fall into sin and the necessity of the Incarnation

God created the world and implicitly man, out of love, and to spread love around them. As love is the keyword in terms of the Being of God and His relationship with the world, "man was also required, as its representative, to obey a simple command whose relevance was the act of love as a factor of its observance"<sup>2</sup>.

But the curiosity of experiencing the unknown, the curiosity that brought about the fall into sin, caused man to alienate himself from God, and through this alienation, man would chain himself into harm, thereby destroying harmony and unity, both between him and God and between him and nature. The fall into sin "has dimmed the image of God inside man, without perverting him"<sup>3</sup>. It is interesting to note that, with the destruction of harmony and unity, sin will gradually be imposed. In fact, it is sin that

<sup>1</sup> Ioan I. ICA jr, "Părintele Dumitru Stăniloae «clasic» al teologiei secolului XX și misiunea teologiei în Biserică și în societate", in: *Studii Teologice*, 1, 2005, p. 173.

<sup>2</sup> SF. SIMEON NOUL TEOLOG, *Țelul vieții creștine*, coll. *Comorile Pustiei*, transl. by Arhimandrit Paulin LECCA, Editura Anastasia, București, 1996, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Paul EVDOKIMOV, *Orthodoxia*, transl. from French by Dr. Irineu Ioan POPA, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1996, p. 98.

produces an existential divide within man, “his rationality and spirit-minded nature being destroyed”<sup>4</sup> and because of this, man will deviate from the rational ones and will enter the irrational ones. The irrationality was manifested by the fact that Adam let himself tempted by Eve to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 3, 6), ignoring the commandment received directly from God.

Being in the position of choosing between communion and possession, Adam will choose the latter, ignoring the commandment of God, and his deed coming from a self-centered love, oriented to an apparent or illusory reality, will suddenly become sin and decadence.

Sin made the world lacking in transparency and producing death, thus harming cosmic harmony and causing fracture in the system of normal relationships in which man was constituted at the time of creation. By breaking communion with God, man will isolate himself from the true source of life, losing his familiarity with Him, which will bring about biological death.

From the moment of falling into sin, the evil consequences of the intrusion of sin into the world begin to appear. At the same time with themselves, Adam and Eve subjected to this curse, the whole humanity that would descend from them: “... by the offense of one, judgment to condemnation came upon all men...” (Romans 5,18). By sinning, man broke the bond with God, losing grace. Loss of grace, “he had suppressed the possibility and the framework necessary to resemble God, so they could no longer obtain immortality, which generated death”: “... for the wages of sin is death ...” (Rom 6, 23)<sup>5</sup>. By restraining his own spiritual power, man subjected himself to the bodily side, being robed by it, until the restoration of the Harice bond through Christ-the New Adam: “For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive” (I Corinthians 15, 22)<sup>6</sup>.

Even if man has departed from God, He will not let him down to his own deeds, but out of the same creative love that man had not appreciated, God decided to give him a chance: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish

<sup>4</sup> SF. VASILE CEL MARE, *Omilii la Psalmi, Omilia 65, PG 29, 480 A.*

<sup>5</sup> Alexe ȘTEFAN, “Concepția Fericitului Augustin despre păcat și har”, in: *Studii Teologice*, 5-6, 1956, p. 336.

<sup>6</sup> Isidor TODORAN, Ioan ZĂGREAN, *Teologia Dogmatică, Manual pentru Seminariile Teologice*, Ediția a II-a, Editura Renașterea, Cluj, 1997, p. 169.

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but have eternal life” (John 3, 16). This opportunity is given to man immediately after the expulsion<sup>7</sup>, moment recorded in the Holy Scripture, by the words: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3, 15). This moment marks the beginning of the history of the human race salvation and this thread will anchor the hope of all mankind.

### III. The era previous to the “fullness of time”

Sin had been committed, therefore the human nature faded away and the connection with God was interrupted. There was need for restoration of the state before the fall. That is why, out of His great love for mankind, God decided to send His only begotten Son into the world, to give Him ransom for sin<sup>8</sup>, for He was the Only One capable of rebuilding what our forefathers, Adam and Eve, lost. The Son of God Incarnate, “at the fullness of time” (Galatians 4, 4) “assumed our nature and temper for our sake, healing our disobedience and becoming the servant of our salvation”<sup>9</sup>.

But, until the “fullness of time”, that is the coming of the Messiah there had passed a long period of time, during which mankind was prepared for His reception. From the moment of the fall, until the restoration of a new climate favorable to salvation, to be offered by “the descendant out of the seed of the woman”, mankind would go through a difficult period, marked by the evil consequences of sin. There is a long period of preparation for the world to receive the One Who would bring salvation, a period marked by divine iconony<sup>10</sup>, as a guiding factor. This training was necessary because man had not realized the seriousness of his deed.

<sup>7</sup> Sf. GRIGORIE DE NYSSA, *Despre feciorie*, în PG 46, 376 D; Sf. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Omilia la Facere, Omilia XXV*, Trad din limba greacă veche și note de Pr. Prof. Dumitru FECIORU, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 21, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1987, p. 194.

<sup>8</sup> Ioan MIRCEA, “Răscumpărarea în Noul Testament după învățătura Sfinților Părinți”, in: *Studii Teologice*, 1-2, 1972, p. 38.

<sup>9</sup> Sf. IOAN DAMASCHIN, *Dogmatica*, Ediția a III-a, traducere de Pr. Dumitru FECIORU, Editura Scripta, București, 1993, p. 97.

<sup>10</sup> Ioan BRIA, *Dicționar de Teologie Ortodoxă A-Z*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1994, p. 199.

Trying to make a step-by-step comparison of the time before “the fullness of time”, namely before the coming of the Messiah, we notice that there were three periods:

a) *The Eden period or stage*, which once and for all determines the fundamental features of the human condition on earth, where the first moral duty was creative work (Genesis 2:15), and where religiously, Adam’s descendants are called upon to cope the tension between the ideal of deification that had been established by the Creator and the temptation to sin inherited from the ancestors;

b) *The age of the natural law*, in which the general traits of the human race developed and in which, because of the spread of idolatry and the multiplication of sins, our isolation from the will of God has become an almost universal fact;

c) *The age of the old law* - inaugurated by the supernatural revelation on Mount Sinai, which summing up these general traits in a series of unique and significant experiences, prepared the Messianic era<sup>11</sup>.

a). The religious-moral characteristic of the first period is the existential experience of Adam and Eve, who, for not respecting the commandment, lost their state of innocence, holiness and happiness that they had enjoyed and went into a state of injustice, suffering and corruptibility<sup>12</sup>. The punishment that had been caused to them had to make them realize first the irreducible contradiction between truth and lie, good and evil, virtue and sin, life and death, and then the absolute necessity for God to be merciful and to bring them out of the state where they fell and which was impossible to overcome by their own powers. The reality of the ancestral sin, together with its adverse consequences, to which all the representatives of the human race are subject, constitutes, after the Apostle Paul, the “premise of the entire dogmatic edifice of Christian soteriology”<sup>13</sup>.

b). The period of natural law is marked by the personality of Patriarch Abraham, whom God has chosen to be the root of the nation, from which everyone will be blessed. What made him right before God was faith

<sup>11</sup> Nicolae RĂDULESCU, “Păcatul și eliberarea după Noul Testament”, in: *Studii Teologice*, 7-10, 1976, p. 669.

<sup>12</sup> Jean DELUMEAU, *Păcatul și frica. Culpabilitatea în Occident secolele XIII-XVII*, Editura Polirom, București, 1997, p. 46.

<sup>13</sup> Simion TODORAN, “Mântuirea obiectivă după Epistolele Sfântului Apostol Pavel”, in: *Studii Teologice*, 3-4, 1982, p. 223.

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proved by deed<sup>14</sup>. From his heart would be born the race from which the Messiah would come in the flesh, for which God made a covenant with Abraham, a covenant sealed by the circumcision of the flesh, prefiguration of the circumcision of the heart in the spirit. This required an external sign to maintain the consciousness of the chosen people up to the fullness of the promise, hence the temporal character of circumcision<sup>15</sup>.

c). The question is asked why the law was given on Mount Sinai if the release was possible only through the Messiah's Person and not through the Law? The answer is simple. Because the chosen people did not clearly define the consciousness of sin and the faith that their father, Abraham, proved, and then the Law was given to always remind them the promise made to God and to guide them to its fullness. By obliging circumcision, as prescribed by the Law, the conscience of the covenant was continuously perpetuated, and by the moral, and cultic prescriptions of the Law, the conscience of sin was maintained. This multiplication of sin, which is aggravated by reference to the Law, was intended not to let vanish the believers desire and hope to the Promised Saviour. The law was the "shadow of future goods" (Galatians 3, 24) and "the guide to Christ" (Hebrews 10, 1)<sup>16</sup>.

Although the Law was "right and good", having its origin in God, it could not change man except from outside, acting from the outside<sup>17</sup>. All moral prescriptions showed what man had not to do, except, of course, making the summary of the Law contained in the love of God and neighbor (Luke 10, 27), love inaccessible to man by his own powers. This helplessness due to the inability of man's natural powers has increased the burden of sin and guilt. The ceremonial prescriptions prefigured the saving sacrifice of the Savior and the purification of sins through repentance. The fact that the Law was leading to the Messiah, the Most Desirable, is quite clear from the writings of the prophets who agree on the divine-human origin of the Historical Person, Who will deliver the world from

<sup>14</sup> Paul BEAUCHAMP, *Cincizeci de portrete biblice*, traducere din limba franceză de Claudiu CONSTANTINESCU, Editura Cartier, București, 2001, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> Ioan BUGA, "Personalitatea Patriarhului Avraam oglindită în Epistolele Sfântului Apostol Pavel", in: *Studii Teologice*, 3-4, 1973, p. 194.

<sup>16</sup> Gheorghe BURTAN, "Rolul îndrumător al Vechiului Testament", in: *Studii Teologice*, 9-10, 1973, pp. 728-729.

<sup>17</sup> George Arthur BUTTRICK (ed.), *The Interpreter's Dictionary of The Bible*, Supplementary Volume, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1984, p. 694.

its helplessness, and in Whom the Law not only will be fulfilled, but will be perfect<sup>18</sup>. Based on the information provided by the prophets, upon the coming of the Messiah to the world, mankind had already drawn a picture of its Saviour<sup>19</sup>.

This was the time before the “fulness of time”, in a perpetual preparation for the great historical moment of the Incarnation of the Son of God, of the union of the divine with the human, for eternity. The Incarnation of the Word of God, from the Virgin Mary, “at the fulness of time” (cf. Galatians 4, 4) marks the beginning of the most important stage in the history of salvation.

#### IV. The soteriological significance of the Incarnation

One of the remarkable revealing events in the history of salvation is the Incarnation of the Son of God. Even from the Book of Genesis 3,15, the significant moment of the promised Incarnation of the Savior is seen as a red thread throughout history, until He appears to the world as the Son of God Incarnate.

The hope of the promised coming of the Savior and at the same time of the Incarnation of the Son of God can be observed constantly throughout the life of the Biblical Israel. In this sense, the sapiential literature, the didactic-poetic books and the Old Testament prophets, in their capacity as chosen by God, have reproduced in their works many aspects of the saving work, defended and cultivated the Old Testament monotheism, thus preparing mankind for the Incarnation of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ<sup>20</sup>.

Adopted in the counsel of the Trinity, the judgment of salvation had to be made known to people, also by people, so that they could understand it<sup>21</sup>, so that the Messianic prophecies had the purpose of announcing the

<sup>18</sup> Emilian CORNIȚESCU, “Persoana lui Mesia și lucrarea sa în lumina profețiilor vechitamentare”, in: *Studii Teologice*, 9-10, 1985, p. 607.

<sup>19</sup> Alexandru ISVORANU, “Plinirea Legii și a Proorociilor în Iisus Hristos”, in: *Mitropolia Olteniei*, 3-6, 1997, p. 40.

<sup>20</sup> John S. FEINBERG, *Salvation in the Old Testament – Tradition and Testament. Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, Chicago, Moody Press, 1981, pp. 64-65.

<sup>21</sup> Dumitru ABRUDAN, “Profeții și rolul lor în istoria mântuirii”, in: *Mitropolia Ardealului*, 3-4, 1983, p. 139.

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coming of the Messiah, and the divine Revelation contained in the New Testament identified with the Person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate for our salvation. In fact, the Sacred Scripture and the Holy Tradition as sources of the spiritual revelation made the Son known as the perfect image of the Father (II Corinthians 4: 4), the Son being the summary of the whole Divine Revelation. The statements: “the fullness of the time”<sup>22</sup> (Galatians 4, 4) and “in the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets” (Hebrews 1, 1), indeed suppose a period preceding the achievement of salvation. This period ended when the consciousness of guilt and man’s inability to rise from the unnatural state in which he had come because of the sin was fully conceived in man’s soul.

The Son and Word of God, the Savior Jesus Christ, was Incarnated in the “fullness of time”, when mankind was prepared by the divine providence for His reception. This preparation, as we had mentioned in the previous chapter, was accomplished by the natural moral law manifested in the consciousness, about which the Apostle Paul speaks to us (Romans 1, 19-25).

In the vetero-testament period, the prophet Isaiah announces *the fullness of time*, referring to a sign: “Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us” (Isaiah 7, 14). The sign that the prophet Isaiah recalls in his vision was made and fulfilled by the proclamation that the angel made to the Virgin Mary at God’s appointed time, and Emanuel *אֱמָנוּאֵל*, who is interpreted “God is with us”, is the name given to Jesus<sup>23</sup>, a name to which the angel of the Lord will refer when addressing in a dream to Joseph: “... they shall call his name Emmanuel” (Matthew 1, 23).

A considerable contribution to the preparation of mankind for the coming of the Messiah also had prophet Daniel, who had been called to the prophetic mission during the Babylonian exile. The Prophet Daniel places the coming of the Messiah to *the fulness of time* (Daniel 7, 22) or to *the appointed time* (cf. Daniel 11, 35)<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> This expression highlights the fact that the term God has chosen for the divine reality of his saving plan to become a concrete reality. (See, *Biblia sau Sfânta Scriptură*, Ediție jubiliară a Sfântului Sinod, trad. de I.P.S. Bartolomeu Valeriu ANANIA, Ed. I.B.M.B.O.R., București, 2001, nota g cu explicație la Galateni 4, 4, p. 1671).

<sup>23</sup> A. J. MOTYER, *The Revelation of the Divine Name*, Trinity College, Bristol, 1959, p. 25.

<sup>24</sup> Nicolae PETRESCU, “Tâlcuirea Apostolului la Nașterea Domnului”, in: *Mitropolia Olteniei*, 10-12, 1977, p. 791.



The Savior Himself begins his teaching with the words, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand ...” (Mark 1, 15), and the Apostle Paul, in the Epistle to the Ephesians speaks of the *iconomics of the fulfillment of times* (Ephesians 1, 9 -10), stating God’s sovereignty over history and God’s divine judgment of sending the Son to the world<sup>25</sup>.

The semantic field of the phrase “the fulness of time - τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου” (Galatians 4, 4) allows us to elucidate some key aspects of the “Mystery of the Kenosis”<sup>26</sup>, which are in close connection with the mystery of our salvation<sup>27</sup>, the Incarnation of the Savior being the center of history and pointing the end of an era and the beginning of another.

In the sense of the Apostle to the Gentiles, the fulfillment of the promise of salvation through the sending of the Son of God to the world, is the “temporal center of all other events in the history of salvation; this center of history is no longer placed in the future. The past and the future only make sense in the light of this unique and unrepeatable event”<sup>28</sup>. Through the Incarnation, the Son of God united in Himself the above and the lower ones, that is, God with man, and thereby God with all creation. The Incarnation of the Son of God brought to the world the “grace of deification”. The Son of God was incarnated to sanctify human nature and gives it the possibility of deification.

The Incarnation of the Son of God and His sending to the world is affirmed by the Savior Himself, Who entrusts us that He is sent by the Father: “... and whosoever shall receive me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me”. (Mark 9, 37). The verb, ἐξαποστέλλειν, which means *to send*, is used by the Apostle Paul only in the Epistle to the Galatians when he refers to the fact that: “But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son” (Galatians 4, 4.6). The use of this verb ἐξαποστέλλειν supposes the idea of pre-existence, for He Who is sent exists before he is sent. The theme of the pre-existence of Christ is reinterpreted here by the Apostle Paul, being related to the kenosis of the Son of God, that is the idea of His descent, through the Incarnation, to the human state<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> Vasile MIHOC, *Epistola Sfântului Apostol Pavel către Galateni. Studiu introductiv, traducere și comentarii. Teză de doctorat*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1983, p. 148.

<sup>26</sup> Sf. IOAN DAMASCHIN, *Εἰς πρὸς Ἑβραίους*, chap. 7, PG 95, 964 D.

<sup>27</sup> Hilaire de POITIERS, *La Trinité*, vol. II, coll. *Sources Chrétiennes* 448, Les Editions du Cerf, Paris, 2000, p. 450.

<sup>28</sup> Oscar CULLMANN, *Christ et le temps: Temps et histoire dans le christianisme primitif*, Delachaux et Niestlé, Neuchâtel-Paris, 1947, pp. 11-12 and 50.

<sup>29</sup> Vasile MIHOC, *Epistola Sfântului Apostol Pavel către Galateni...*, p. 149.

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The mystery of the kenosis belongs to the apophatic dimension of theology, after Saint John Chrysostom, “kenosis being inexpressible and indescribable”<sup>30</sup>. It is

“inexpressible, because the human mind is not able to understand the descent of the Logos to our own measures through His Incarnation and to express it fully in our words. It is indescribable because it is about overcoming human experiences with God’s entry into the sphere of creation. The mystery can not be researched in its depth, but it can be accepted by faith, in order to enrich us spiritually”<sup>31</sup>.

The Incarnation of the Word, “And the Word became flesh ...” (John 1,14), His coming into a body like ours, “means His coming into our human condition, assuming it by Him”<sup>32</sup>. Continuing the abiding statement of Saint John the Theologian, the Apostle Paul, by the phrase “fullness of time - τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου” (Galatians 4, 4), also “presents us the divine dialectics of salvation: at the fulness of time the Son of God became a complete man, so that He should be able to make people sons of God”<sup>33</sup>.

## V. Conclusions

1. The curiosity of experiencing the unknown, curiosity that brought the fall to sin, caused man to alienate himself from God. From the moment of falling into sin, the evil consequences of the intrusion of sin into the world begin to appear.

2. Even if man, by falling into sin, has departed from God, He will not abandon him to his own deeds, but out of the same creative love, God has decided to give him a chance, a moment recorded in the Holy Scripture, by the words: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will

<sup>30</sup> SF. IOAN HRISOSTOM, *Υπόμνημα εις την προς Φιλιππησίους Επιστολή*, 2, 7, PG 62, 231.

<sup>31</sup> Florin Toader TOMOIOAGĂ, *Taina Chenozei în Teologia ortodoxă a secolului al XX-lea*, Ed. Mitropolia Olteniei, Craiova, 2013, p. 32.

<sup>32</sup> Michel HENRY, *Întrupare – O filozofie a trupului*, prezentare și traducere de Ioan I. ICĂ JR., Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2003, p. 34.

<sup>33</sup> Vasile MIHOC, *Epistola Sfântului Apostol Pavel către Galateni...*, p. 150.

strike his heel” (Genesis 3,15). This moment marks the beginning of the history of the salvation of the human race, this thread will anchor the hope of all mankind.

3. From the moment of falling into sin and restoring a new climate favorable to salvation, there is a long period of preparation for the world to receive the One Who would bring salvation, a period marked by the divine iconony through three preparatory stages.

4. The hope of the promised Savior’s coming and at the same time of the Incarnation of the Son of God can be observed constantly throughout the entire existence of biblical Israel until the fulness of time.

5. The Savior’s Incarnation is the center of history; it marks the end of an age and the beginning of another. In the sense of Saint Paul, the fulfillment of the promise of salvation by sending of the Son of God in the world is the temporal center of all the other events in the history of salvation.