

Christmas Message: Galatians 4:1-7: From Slaves to Sons

OUTLINE

What we were
What God did
What we become

INTRODUCTION

It is Christmas time again. Once again the world is handing itself over to carnival preparing to eat, and drink, and holiday and give gifts and be merry. In the western world there is the constant attempt to remove Christ from Christmas. But even where Christmas carols are still sung, and Christmas parades are still called so, and 'Happy Holidays' does not replace 'Merry Christmas', this is no guarantee that the Christ will be honoured. This is no guarantee that Christians will not be caught up in the materialism that has come to dominate a time of worship. So it is my duty today to try and remind us of the importance of the incarnation, and our text this morning is Galatians 4:1-7, 'I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything,² but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father.³ In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.'

Galatia was in the vicinity of modern day Turkey. The Galatians were being harassed by false teachers. These false teachers were of a Jewish nature and were teaching that the only way to be saved is to accept circumcision and the OT laws. It was a case of Jesus plus the law as a way of salvation. Paul was writing to the Galatians to reaffirm the gospel they heard at first, that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ alone and not by the law. In the context Paul has been talking about how the law was a guardian and schoolmaster keeping the Jews under detention until Christ came. It was the purpose of the law to prepare the Jews for Christ and now that He has come the law must be put away. That Jews and Gentiles are all one family in Christ by faith not by becoming Jews. The portion we have before us is one of Paul's reflections on the purpose of the incarnation, v4-5 in particular. This section divides into three portions. V1-3 describes what we were, we were slaves. V4-5 describe what God did, He sent Christ. And v5-7 describe what we become children instead of slaves.

What we were

1-3, 'I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.' It is obvious that Paul is already in the middle of a discussion. This portion is set forth as a clarification with the opening words, 'I mean.' He clarifying a thought that begins in 3:23 where he talks about how the Jews were imprisoned under the law as a guardian to prepare for the coming of Christ. A helpful way to read this section is by understanding that every time Paul uses the word 'we' in the ESV he is talking about the collective experience of the Jews with which he associates himself. This lends his criticism the strength of a first person account, in particular a Jewish critique against Jewish false teachers. And alternatively, every time you read the word 'you' Paul is addressing the

Gentile and Jewish believers in Galatia. The 'we' is a reflection on the past experience of the Jews and the 'you' a statement about the present benefits of the believer. It is important to note this as these are the two things being constantly compared. The false teachers were attempting to take the Galatians back into the OT experience which Paul has described as an imprisonment and a time of preparing, as well as a time put away with the coming of salvation through faith in Christ.

Here he elaborates on what living under the law was like drawing on a familiar picture from Roman culture. 'The heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave.' In Roman culture while the son of a rich man was a minor he was usually set under the responsibility and tutoring of a guardian. In many cases this would be a slave, slaves did a lot of the teaching in the ancient world. This slave would decide when the child would wake up, when they would eat, what they did with their timetable and were often authorised to discipline the child. Paul says this is just what the OT was like under the OT law. 'Though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principle of the world.' 'Held captive, imprisoned, enslaved, no different from a slave', this is how Paul describes the time of being under the law. The words 'elementary principles' could have a broad meaning, but given the context we have just described we can take them in the same way we mean them today. 'Elementary, Dear Watson' are famous words spoken by Sherlock Holmes to indicate that things are discerned according to the most basic rules of logic. Elementary school is where we learn our ABCs. The OT was the elementary stage of development, that was a type of captivity which is graduated from when we believe in Christ.

Paul's point is simple, he has just told the Galatians that they have become sons of God and entered into their majority in v26. It is even suggested that v27 when Paul says we have 'put of Christ' is a play on the idea that when a young man come into adulthood he was dressed in a new toga symbolizing his coming of age. Paul is saying do not go back to slavery, do not go back to primary school.

What God did

The question we could ask at this point is how did God bring us out of the OT into the NT, out of childhood into adulthood, out of slavery into sonship? v4-5, 'But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,5 to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.' The answer is of course—Christmas. What does Paul mean by 'when the fullness of time had come?' some think it means that when it came time for us to become adults. Some have thought about the great way in which God's providence prepared the ancient world with a single tongue and roads and political stability which would speed the gospel on its way. But in all likelihood it means the end of this age and the dawning of the new. With the coming of Christ and by His death and resurrection He would introduce the new age, and the powers of the age to come would penetrate this dying age. The overlap of the ages begins with the work of Christ.

'God sent forth His Son.' For many this is a throw away statement, but read it carefully and see what it means. Before He was born of woman or born under the law, He existed to be sent. And in the sending He was the Son, He did not become the Son by being sent. This is a wonderful proof of Christ's pre-existent deity and His eternal sonship. We must not overlook the words 'God sent.' The teaching of the bible is that God is holy and must judge sinners, for it is unjust to not punish and God cannot deny His own justice and righteousness. Some may get the impression that God is unwilling to save, but hear His

willingness in those words, 'God sent.' He sees your sin, He convicts you of it so that you can see something of it as well. When we have this revelation we might think to run from God, but we must be reminded here of His willingness to save sinners, to receive sinners. He was willing to send His Son to save sinners, John 3:16, "'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.'

'born of woman.' Galatians 4:4 literally reads, '...become/made of a woman'. The word 'born' which is found in other parallel phrases (Matthew 11:11, Job 14:1) is not found here. Romans 1:3 uses the same 'become' instead of 'born' language, so it would read, '...become from David...'. Phil 2:7 has the word made not born. And as one commentator has said regarding Phil 2:7, 'Is this how one is accustomed to speak of a natural birth?' (MacLeod, p31). Each reference guards against the usual way of speaking of being born. And the expected word for born is replaced with become/made.

What is the importance of the virgin birth? Does it really matter whether Jesus was born of a virgin? Desmond Tutu and Rob Bell don't think it too important. But we do. The virgin birth, like the resurrection brackets the life of Christ as being unique. He alone was conceived and died like He did. These events are important signs that point to His identity and work. After all Is 7:14 does speak of Immanuel as a 'sign'. It indicates the unique saving work God is doing in Christ. Secondly, the importance of the miraculous element of the virgin birth cannot be overstated, it is a watershed dividing those who feel that this is possible and all the other supernatural elements of the Bible are accepted or rejected. It is often the starting block, or the stumbling block for the other miracles in the Bible. Thirdly, the fact of the virgin birth pronounces a judgement upon the stillborn ability of our own fallen human nature to produce a saviour. We cannot save ourselves, no one from fallen humanity can save us God, God has to come from outside of us to do what we could not do for ourselves. Be the perfect offerer of the perfect offering to atone for sin. Fourthly, one must not miss the eschatological significance of the virgin birth. When is the beginning of the new heavens and earth? Given the wording of the Holy Spirit being over Mary like over the waters in Genesis 1, we are being told that a new creation is beginning with the birth of Christ. The future has arrived, not in its fullness, but definitely in Christ. And so we are living in the last days, marked by the arrival of the promised Seed.

But what about the significance for Christ Himself is it important that He was born of a virgin? Why cant we say that God inhabited and made holy the fertilised egg of a regular marriage? Adoptionism is the view that says that Jesus inhabited/took over/possessed an already existing person. That is the trajectory for the above condition where we asked about why He couldn't just have come in the normal way. He would have had to become a body snatcher. As we understand the humanity of Christ, it was not one that was stolen from another, but it came into existence as already the flesh of God. Jesus humanity has never not been His. Another possible reason for why this is not the way He could have come is because of the problem of double paternity. Christ came speaking and teaching about His Father, who is God not Joseph. He had no Father but God. True, Joseph adopted Jesus, this is apparent in him naming Him. But all Christ's talk of being one with His Father, would be empty if He was 'biologically' fathered by another. The arguments about His own identity, authority, and work are based on who His Father is. Thirdly, that which is born of flesh is flesh and impotent to save. Christ is not born of the flesh, but the Spirit. Fourthly, it was necessary for Christ to be a second Adam, that just as the first Adam was born without parents, Christ too miraculously be created. The only difference being that God made Adam from dirt, where He made Christ from the 'dirt' of Mary's DNA. Christ necessarily had to have His source outside the headship of the first Adam, yet have his humanity derived from the same fallen race. This double necessity is fulfilled in His receiving His human nature from His mother, but His being conceived miraculously, like the first Adam, in order to stand

as a representative. His virgin birth contributes to His independence of the imputed sin of Adam. Fifthly, we reject the view that sees the act of sexual intercourse as sinful and beneath Christ, and therefore Mary became a perpetual virgin.

'Born under the law.' Christ did not simply come to die, but to live a full human life in submission to the Law as well. Obeying every command of God. John Murray has rightly pointed out that the whole work of Christ can be captured in one word, the word 'servant'. The word used by Isaiah to describe the coming Messiah, (52:13, 53:11). Servant implies obedience, and we can divide the obedience of Christ into two parts, theologians call this the active and passive obedience of Christ. Many think of Christ's suffering and obedience relating exclusively to the cross, when in fact every action towards our salvation from incarnating in the flesh, growing up, living a life of submission to the Law of God, as well as dying is what He endured for us. These words refer to the 2 demands of the Law upon us. Law demands that death be paid for the punishment of broken sin, and the Law also demands full obedience to its every command. Christ's death pays the penalty law demands, and His life fulfills the obedience the law demands. This means that Christ fulfills the penalty of the law for us by dying for us, that is His passive obedience; and He fulfills the requirements of positive obedience the Law requires too, this is His active obedience. Christ did not arrive on earth as a fully grown man like Adam to die for us, He had to submit to the Law as a descendant of Abraham, to save the Jews (Gal 4:4-5). And live a life of obedience to the Law for all of us. He submitted Himself to all the requirements of the Law, fulfilling them for us.

'to redeem those under the law.' The word redeem is a word picture which speaks about a slave being bought to be set free. The payment price for freedom is called a ransom, and of course Jesus is talking about the ransom price of His death, Mark 10:45, 'For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'" Jesus was born in order to die. Christ's death on the cross was not a political martyrdom, it was not a grand gesture, it was not simply a warning about the punishment upon sin. It was a payment. The payment was not made to the devil, but to God for our crimes in breaking His law.

What we become

This text tells us about the many wonderful things God did to save us, and Paul goes on to talk about what all He did accomplish. What is interesting is that he puts it all into one grand idea, adoption. '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 you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.' If you were writing this you might have said, 'so that we could be justified.' Justification is the primary benefit we need because our problem is with God's law. But Paul's view of salvation is positive he wants to talk about the fullness that we are saved into, and especially as a contrast to the captivity that the false teachers are promoting.

Please notice how he adjusts the picture of redemption. Instead of a slave being bought with a ransom to be set free, God buys us at the highest price ever paid for a slave, not simply to turn us out onto the streets but to make us children. This would have been similar to the practice of a rich man who had no heirs, but God in His generosity, not out of necessity adopts us. Please notice as well that we are adopted as sons. This is not a sexist statement but a statement of fullness, the son always got the bigger share because the daughters would be expected to marry and join another house but sons keep on the family name and assets and look after the parents. What do we get if we become God's children? Let's approach this question incrementally. What would a child get if they were adopted into

your family? What kind of parent or sibling would you be? What financial benefits would they enjoy? What depth of intimacy would they have with you? What sort of inheritance would you leave them? What would a child get if they were adopted into Brad Pitt's and Angelina Jolie's family? Or if a child is adopted by the richest man in the world? Or by the best Christian in the world? Can it be compared with being adopted by God? Never!

Our adoption unlike natural adoption is irreversible. There is no legal possibility for us to be unadopted, our adoption is as irreversible as our justification, these are irreversible legal states. Our adoption is so permanent and superior that not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ, death does not sever our adoption but rather it advances it.

Our adoption is superior because it is more than a legal state it is also internal. We are told by Paul that the Spirit of God is given to us. In Eph. 1:13-14 we are told that we receive the Spirit when we believe and that His presence is a guarantee of our future inheritance. But more than that Paul is telling us that the Spirit gives us an experiential knowledge of God's love. Both natural and adopted children can doubt the love of their parents, but we are given the Spirit so that we need not doubt. This deep conviction of God's love to us and our confidence in it is seen by the response the Spirit teaches us and fills our heart to say, 'Abba! Father!'

Our adoption is superior because in natural adoption you cannot come to bear the family resemblance. However, by virtue of the Holy Spirit we are conformed into the image of Christ, we are conformed into the image of His holiness incrementally in sanctification and perfectly when we are glorified.

Our adoption is better on account of the perfection of our new Adoptive parent. He will love us with a perfect love, with an unchanging love, and with a love that will be administered in grace and wisdom to meet every need.

Our adoption is better than any earthly adoption on account of the inheritance that is ours. We do not merely get an inheritance but we become co-heirs with firstborn and share in the lion's portion. Paul points this out at the end of v7.

God the Son, became the son of man, to make the children of the devil, sons of God. This is an identity that Paul is laying before the Galatians as an alternative to going back to the law, it is a reminder of the fullness that we have which rescues us not only from going to legalism but the poverty of sin as well. So as Christmas comes around this year, remember what you were, what God did, and what we have become because Jesus was born.