



God Sent forth His Son

Galatians 3

Text: Galatians 4:1-7

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This sermon is an advent sermon. Advent is a period of time in the traditional church calendar during which many congregations reflect on the idea of living in the light of the promise of the coming of Jesus into the world for our salvation. It includes reflection on living in the light of both the first and second comings of our Lord. We, of course, cannot live in the light of the first coming of Jesus, but we can reflect on the idea that the people of God have always lived in the light of promises of a coming redeemer. The first promise was made immediately after the fall and so it has always been a characteristic of the lives of God's people that they are waiting for the fulfillment of promises of salvation and since salvation is tied to Jesus and his coming, it has always been a characteristic of God's people that they are waiting for the coming of Jesus, either the first coming which occurred when Jesus was born or the second coming when Jesus will bring salvation to its consummation at the end of the age.

I read an interesting article by Sinclair Ferguson last week about the celebration of the birth of Christ. Basically what he said is that while there is no biblical requirement to do so at this time of the year, it is a good opportunity to spend some time reflecting on the incarnation and its significance. He noted that those who do not pay any attention to Jesus' birth during this season are not likely to give it the attention it warrants during the rest of the year and that three or four sermons in connection with Christmas each year ensures that this vital doctrine gets the kind of attention that the Scripture gives to it. Certainly it is not a requirement, but it does give us a regular schedule for paying attention and celebrating the significance of the birth of Christ.

Galatians 4:1-7 is a good passage to consider in connection with advent because of verses 4&5 which say, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." This text is about God sending his Son into the world for our salvation. It places the coming of Jesus in its broader context of the history of salvation. This text, in its context, makes the point that the coming of Jesus and the redemption that he accomplished changed the situation of God's people from one that resembled slavery in some ways to one of adoption into God's family.

This passage is part of Paul's argument for justification by faith and not by works. The letter to the Galatians was written because the Galatian church was being troubled by Christians of Jewish background who were teaching that salvation required keeping the Law of Moses. Over against that false teaching, Paul was insisting that we are saved through faith in Christ apart from the works of the law. And as part of his argument he compares the situation of Old Testament believers with New Testament believers. He compares Old Testament believers to a child who is an heir to an estate while he is still a young child. Verses 1-3 say, "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 are children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world."

So Old Testament believers were heirs of salvation, but God was treating them like a young child in the care of guardians and managers and he compares that to slavery. The Old Testament situation **compared to the New Testament situation** was like the experience of a young child compared to an adopted grown-up son. Young children are controlled by their caregivers. They do not have a lot of freedom. Their lives are controlled by external rules. And so they are like slaves, not in every sense of course, but in the sense that their lives are controlled by external restraints. Paul is very free with the imagery of slavery when he describes the relationship of Old Testament believers to the law. In verse 23 of chapter 3 he writes, "Now before faith came, we were held

captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed.”

Now this does not mean that there was no grace in the Old Testament situation. In chapter 3, Paul refers to Abraham and his justification by faith. Salvation was always by grace through faith. The false teachers had not correctly understood the Old Testament. It had never taught salvation by the works of the law. But there was a huge difference between the experience of the Old Testament believer and the experience of the New Testament believer. And that difference had to do with the prominence of the external laws of God in the Old Testament and the prominence of justification by faith in the New Testament. There are not two different ways of salvation, but there is certainly a difference in emphasis and experience so that Paul compares the Old Testament experience to a child under guardians whose experience is in some ways like that of a slave to that of an adopted son who has come of age. And what made the difference is the coming of Christ.

Verses 4-5, “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”

Now in order to appreciate the significance of the coming of Christ, as Paul speaks of it in this passage, it is necessary to understand our situation apart from Christ. And Paul speaks of it in two different ways in this context. One has to do with the idea that apart from Christ we are under the curse of the law. The false teachers were teaching that keeping the law was a necessary part of the way of salvation. And in countering that false teaching Paul insists that unless we keep the law perfectly we are under its curse. In chapter 3, Paul writes that anyone who does not keep the law perfectly is cursed. 3:10 “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse, for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’”

That is your situation and mine apart from Jesus and what he has done for us. Unless we have kept the law of God perfectly, we are cursed. And since none of us as kept the law of God perfectly we are all cursed

apart from Christ. We are under the curse of the law. The law of God condemns us. We deserve the punishment of the law which is death – ultimately eternal separation from God. In order to appreciate the significance of the birth of Christ, it is necessary to feel something of the horror of our situation apart from Christ. It is very dark. There is no hope. The just wrath of God is directed at us. And at the end of our lives we would face the judgment of God as rebels against God if it were not for what Jesus has done for us. Living in the light of eternal punishment is the ultimate hopelessness. The good news in the light of this bad news is that the way of salvation is not by law-keeping but by believing in Jesus.

But the good-news of Jesus is also presented over against the Old Testament situation in the New Testament. That is not our experience directly, but the comparison between the situation after Christ with the situation for God's people before Christ helps us to understand and appreciate the riches that we have in Christ. And that is what we see in our text. Paul makes liberal use of the imagery of slavery to describe the experience of the Old Testament believer compared to the new. The experience of Old Testament believers was glorious compared to that of the other nations, but compared to the experience of New Testament believers it was in some way like slavery. The law with its detailed prohibitions and prescriptions was very much "in your face." Verse 3 of our text says, "[W]hen we were children, [we] were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world." That phrase "elementary principles of the world" is a difficult phrase, but the context makes it clear that Paul is referring to the Old Testament way of being under the law, and probably also the misunderstanding of the role of the law that was reflected by the false teachers.

It was a situation in which believers were treated like little children – with the law directing the minutia of their lives. In Acts 15:10 Peter refers to it as "a yoke ... that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear."

So it is possible to be under the curse of the law. Those who are not believers in Jesus are under God's curse because of their law-breaking and that is a terrible way to live. They are under the wrath of their

maker and they are heading towards eternal condemnation unless they repent and believe in Jesus. The Bible takes pains to remind us again and again that this is the situation of all people apart from salvation in Christ. But the Bible also describes Old Testament believers in the light of Christ. They were much better off than unbelievers but they were being treated like children with external laws dominating their lives so that compared to the experience of New Testament believers their experience somewhat resembled that of a slave.

And the point of this comparison in the New Testament is to express the wonderful freedom of believers after Jesus has come. This is what Paul expresses in verses 4-7, "But [contrast] when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent his 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."

This is one of the biblical passages that describes what there is to celebrate about the coming of Jesus for the followers of Jesus. The verses that I just read begin with the word "but." The "but" contrasts the before and after. The "but" is what the celebration of the birth of Christ is about. We celebrate because "God sent forth his Son ... to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."

The contrast is between being under the law and being redeemed. It is between being treated like a slave and treated like a son. This is how Paul here presents the birth of Jesus and its significance. He uses the word "redeem" to refer to what Jesus came to do. That is a biblical word. It is a theological word. It is the kind of word that makes the eyes of many people glaze over. "Here we go again with all that theological jargon."

But what you must understand is that this is one way that the Bible describes the meaning of the birth of Christ and this is how the Bible describes why the birth of Christ is good news of great joy. It is because God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to

redeem those who were under the law. The word “redeem” sums up the good news of the gospel.

The word, as it is used in the Bible is rooted in the Exodus. There God redeemed his people from slavery. All of the slavery language and redemption language in the Bible is rooted in God’s deliverance of his people from the slavery in Egypt. In that way God provided the concepts and categories to teach us what Jesus came to do. He came to redeem us from slavery. He came to set us free. He came to transform us from slaves to sons. The exodus of Israel from Egypt was a real event, but it also provides us a foreshadowing and a picture of what Jesus would accomplish for us. He would deliver us from slavery from a number of perspectives.

Verse 4 says that Jesus came to “redeem those who were under the law.” Being under the law is used in two ways in this context. To be under the law can be to be under the curse of the law. Chapter 3:13 says, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us...” To be under the law is to be under the curse of the law. But the idea of being under the law can also refer to the way that Old Testament believers were under the law as the first part of this text describes. Old Testament believers were not under the curse of the law because they believed in the coming redeemer and were forgiven on the basis of the sacrifices that pointed to Christ. But they were under the law in the sense of being under all those mosaic ceremonial and civil laws that Peter referred to as a yoke “which neither we or our fathers were able to bear.” This is what Paul is speaking about in the immediate context where he compares the Old Testament experience to that of a slave.

Christ has redeemed us from the law in both of these senses. And the result of that is adoption as sons. The law no longer condemns us. But neither are we under all those Old Testament ceremonial and civil laws. The result of redemption is freedom from the law in a number of important ways. We are free from the curse of the law. And we are free from the slavery of the Old Testament laws. That does not mean we are free from the law in every sense because the freedom that we have in Christ is the freedom to obey God’s moral law – freedom from the

slavery of sin. But there are a number of ways in which redemption in Christ frees us from the law. And that is what it being celebrated in these verses.

The end result is adoption as sons. Verses 6-7, “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.” This is the result of the redemption that Jesus came to bring for believers – for the people of God – not for everyone, but for all who turn from their sins and trust in Jesus.

This is the result of Jesus coming to the world that Paul is celebrating in this text. Because Jesus came, believers are adopted as sons – “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying ‘Abba! Father!’” We are no longer slaves, but sons. We are heirs of God. Adopted by God. We are given the right to call God our Father. We are also given the inner disposition to call God Father by the Holy Spirit. We are given the confidence in the Father’s love and acceptance so that calling God Father feels natural and right. That disposition comes from the Holy Spirit.

This is a very precious thing. If we are believers in Jesus it is because God has worked in us and changed our hearts so that we have come to see that life apart from God is actually death. It is possible to read words like these before us and find them dry and irrelevant and boring. But if our hearts have been changed so that we are really believers we will experience at some level that what Paul is speaking about when he describes adoption as the essence of wellbeing, blessing, security and fulfillment. There is nothing more important in life than to be right with God and when we are adopted by God we are right with God and we are embraced by God as his children and there is nothing more important or precious or wonderful than that.

Our natural tendency, apart from salvation, is to prioritize the joys and pleasures of this world apart from God. That is the tendency of our sinful nature. We focus on God’s gifts and ignore God himself. The things of this life dominate our thoughts and our efforts, and God is ignored or neglected. But when we are saved, we come to see that fullness of life is rooted in our relationship with God. We come to see

that life apart from God is death and that we are cursed apart from Jesus Christ and his salvation. And when God opens our eyes to see these things we begin to see that being redeemed from the curse of the law and being adopted as sons of God is more precious than any of God's gifts considered in themselves.

What Paul is describing here as that which God sent his Son to do is the greatest blessing and blessedness that we can know in this life. It does not mean that everything will go smoothly in this life. Often, God's people experience suffering of various kinds. But it does mean that we are sons of God. It means that we are set free from the slavery of sin and also from the slavery of the Old Testament situation. We free from the curse of the law. And we are set free from the power of sin. We are God's beloved children who love God and find our greatest joy in relating to him as children to a loving and caring Father. We do not do that perfectly in this life, but we do experience the beginning of these things now and we will experience them in perfection in the hereafter.

And we are heirs. The text says that if we are sons of God we are heirs of God. What that refers to is the culmination of our salvation at the return of Christ. Peter gives a good description of our inheritance when he writes in 1 Peter 1:3 that believers are born again to a living hope which is "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for [them]." The concept of inheritance is a "hope concept" in the Bible. The idea that we are heirs of God means that we live in hope of a glorious future beyond this life.

And that is really what the idea of advent is all about. Advent as we have seen, refers to the posture of the people of God as a people who are waiting for the coming of Jesus. Old Testament believers looked forward to Jesus' first coming. New Testament believers look forward to Jesus' second coming. The people of God have always been a people who looked forward in hope and that hope as always been focused on Jesus and the consummation of God's plan of salvation for his people and for the world. What this means is that the idea of advent is the biblical way of understanding time and history.

We see this in verse 4 which says that "God sent forth his Son, born of a woman," "when the fullness of time had come." That language of the

“fulness of time” points us to the biblical way of understanding time and history. It is rooted in the biblical teaching that history is the unfolding of God’s plan and when the right time in God’s plan had come, God sent forth his son. Throughout the Old Testament period God had promised many times that he was going to send a Saviour. All of the Old Testament people of God lived looking forward to the fulfillment of those promises. This is the biblical truth that is conveyed by the idea of advent. It has to do with the biblical way of understanding history as directed by God towards the fulfillment of his promises of salvation which are implemented by Jesus.

Now this way of looking at time is very different from the way that the world looks at time. There are a number of different ways of thinking about time and history. One of the most common in our day has to do with progress which is based on human ingenuity. Many people in our culture see the human race as progressing towards a better and better existence as problems are solved and as science and technology advance. The persistent nature of some problems has diminished the hope in progress to some extent, but still it is probably still the most prominent way of looking at the future in our time. There is some hope for the future and that hope is based on humanity and the idea of progress.

The biblical view of time and history is quite different. The biblical way of looking at the world does not place hope in man. The biblical way of looking at time and history is rooted in God and his providence and his plan for his creation. And all of that is implied in that phrase, “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent for his son.” History is under God’s control. He has a plan for the salvation of his people and the renewal of all things. And the pivotal moments of that plan are the first and the second comings of Jesus Christ.

And the idea of advent is that we inhabit the biblical way of understanding history and that we embrace the posture of the people of God through all the ages who look forward in hope to what God is going to do through his Son. We remember what he has already done, and we celebrate that, but at the same time, we live in hope of the

second coming of Jesus when God will bring his plan for the renewal of his world and our salvation to its climax.

These are two very different ways of being in the world. The worldly way of being in the world hopes in a better future in this world brought about by human abilities. The biblical way of being in the world hopes for a future that God will bring about at the end of the age, the centerpiece of which is Jesus. That future is the completion of the redemption which Jesus brought by his life, death and resurrection. And that redemption is focused on our relationship with God. Because of what Jesus accomplished when he came to earth, we are set free from the curse of the law and adopted as children of God. But we still struggle with sin, and our relationship with God is negatively affected by that sin.

And the hope for our inheritance has to do with the perfection of our relationship with God. Then we will experience freedom in its perfection – the freedom of life as it was meant to be lived in the presence of God, enjoying fellowship with God and perfectly reflecting the character of God in our lives.

Then we will experience the fullness of our adoption – a loving relationship with our Father untroubled by sin. This is the Christian hope. This is what the advent theme in Scripture is about. And growing as a Christian means living more and more focused on that hope. As Paul expresses it in Romans 8:23 “[W]e ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”