

When the Fullness of Time Had Come
Galatians 3:23-4:7
December 18, 2022
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CenterPoint Church

Read Galatians 3:23-4:7

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matt. 4:4b)

Introduction: A Christmas Adoption Story

“’Twas the month leading up to Christmas 2009, and... instead of the usual anticipation of the big day, I found myself frantically trying to wrap up a five-month paperwork extravaganza to meet the little girl who would soon make us a family of four (*I didn’t write this, a woman named Susan Kuligowski did*). We were waiting on one more okay from DHS... I’d been told that the document in question was sitting on so and so’s desk waiting review and approval. As our adoption was international, any hope of finding a window to head out before the upcoming holiday was closing fast. We understood that the courts in our daughter’s birth country typically shut down around Christmas, and waiting families were encouraged to then hold off until the start of the new year to travel. We’d worked really hard to try and bring her home before the holiday, but had run into a few bottlenecks along the way...

We must’ve appeared festive on the outside even if on the inside all I wanted for Christmas was to hold the little one I knew would soon be celebrating her second Christmas in an orphanage – far away from us unaware that we were working so hard to reach her. Unaware of us at all. Christmas songs were the absolute worst. Even some of the happy ones seemed to bring on the tears each morning on the drive into work... With Christmas just around the corner, we did finally receive the final okay and an itinerary of when we could travel. It would be early January... This was really happening! That December turned into a blur of preparation and celebration, along with a different sort of anticipation – that of waiting to meet our daughter far away from the busyness of the season. We headed out so quickly after Christmas that we had little time to do much more than tie up loose ends at home and work, finish packing, and hit the road... our journey would be two months long...

(Back home) as we unpacked our suitcases and settled into our home and daily routine, so, too, Christmas was set away for yet another year – stacked in boxes that were carried down to the basement as our home was cleared to make way for its newest very active and curious occupant – our New Year’s baby, whom I happily gathered into my arms, the little girl I’d longed to hold for months and cried over to sappy Christmas songs and through seasonal toasts. An adopted child is not a thing nor a gift to be possessed, but the opportunity to be a parent certainly is a gift.”¹

That was from Susan Kuligowski’s article “Our Christmas Adoption Story,” and is a window into the world of a family who set their hearts on a little girl halfway around the world to bring into their home, their lives, and their hearts. As we turn to our Scripture passage this morning, we find another Christmas adoption story – ours. Dropped into the middle of Paul’s letter to the Galatians in which he was stridently arguing against those who wanted to force new Gentile Christians to submit to the Old Testament law, we find a passage that tells us that Jesus came into the world on that Christmas day so long ago so that we could be redeemed and then adopted into God’s eternal family. We’ll need to work our way through some of Paul’s arguments beforehand to understand the context, so we start with Paul’s explanation that before the time of Christ...

¹ Susan Kuligowski, “Our Christmas Adoption Story,” found at <https://adoption.com/our-christmas-adoption-story>.

I. Under the Law We Were Captives (3:23-25, 4:1-3)

²³ Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian...

¹ 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.

Now because we're just parachuting into the book of Galatians and not really understanding the flow and context of everything, we need to understand some things that Paul has already said. In verse 10 of this chapter he said, "*all who rely on works of the law are under a curse*" and in verse 11, "*no one is justified before God by the law.*" The early Christians who were Jewish were so used to keeping the law and obeying rules as their religious mindset that it was very hard for them to live by faith, to live with the freedom that comes with being a believer. And even worse, they were urging the Gentile Christians to keep the law with them, and Paul told them that that would fundamentally change the Gospel. The law doesn't save, Jesus does, that's what people need to hear.

The verse before our passage, verse 22, says, "*The Scripture imprisoned everything under sin,*" meaning that the Bible describes the fall of humanity into sin, and sin's control over every person. So sin held all of humanity under its sway, under its curse. Then verse 23 says that God's people additionally were "*held captive*" and "*imprisoned*" by the law. Make sure you understand what he was saying: unbelievers and pagans were only imprisoned by one force - sin; believers in Yahweh, His chosen people, were imprisoned by two forces - sin and the law. We don't usually think about the OT believers and the old covenant in those terms. But we need to understand that Paul doesn't mean that the law is a harsh imprisonment, it's a helpful one. The law was given for our good, to guide us.

Paul goes on to refine the picture and uses a different analogy: a guardian. A child can't make their own legal and financial decisions yet, they are not truly free and mature enough to function like an adult, so they are assigned a guardian. In wealthy Greek families of that day, a child was raised by a servant who was like a babysitter, a chaperone, a tutor, and a disciplinarian all rolled into one, serving the child's and the family's best interests. These people were called pedagogues² - "peda" meaning child and "ago" meaning to lead. But there eventually comes the time when a pedagogue or guardian is no longer necessary: when the child grows up and can make his or her own decisions. The responsibility of the guardian is to bring the child to adulthood. So these verses are saying that God used the law as a guardian - to watch over His people, educating and restraining them in His ways, until the time of the great revealing of His grand plan of redemption. This would be the arrangement until Christ came, until the new covenant was enacted, when God's people would be ready to grow up and be free in Him. The law was never meant to be in charge forever, it was always going to give way to a greater reality. That reality is named three times in these verses: faith. We relate to God now by having faith in Him, not by keeping the law.

Verses 26-29 continue to explain that our status as captives under the law changed; that

II. In Christ We Are Heirs (3:26-29)

²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

² Philip Graham Ryken, *Galatians* (Phillipsburg, NJ:P&R, 2005), p. 139.

Besides faith, what is the big change in these verses from the last section? Verse 26 says “*in Christ Jesus,*” verse 27 says “*baptized into Christ,*” and verse 29 says “*you are Christ’s.*” It’s not **just** that Christ has come, as verse 24 says, but that you are joined to Him by faith. The Christian no longer labors under the tyranny of the law and knows that he or she can’t be saved by keeping the law. The law points to the sinner’s absolute need for a sinless Savior, Jesus.

How cool that we have had baptisms both last Sunday and this morning as I preach today on a passage that says that “*as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.*” Now, if we only had that one verse about baptism, we might think that it means that baptism saves us. But baptism does not save us, it is the sign and seal of the spiritual reality of Christ’s atoning work. It is the outward declaration of what Jesus has done on our behalf and of the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit in us. Baptism brings us into the covenant community where we are united to all of our fellow believers as one in Christ – no longer divided by our ethnicity, our class, or our gender, as verse 28 says.

Now verse 28 can be stretched to say a lot of things that it doesn’t really say. It can be used to support the erasure of gender that our culture has embraced – “see, we’re not male and female anymore, Paul says we no longer have a gender, right?” No. Just as we don’t lose our ethnic identity despite it saying “*there is neither Jew nor Greek.*” Phil Ryken explains that, “the church is not a raceless, classless, androgynous society. When we come to Christ, we do not cease to be Asians or Africans, bosses or employees, or men and women... Being in Christ establishes a fundamental unity within which our diversity can be cherished.”³ Paul is saying that the unity we find in Christ supersedes and takes priority over every other identity. Every division that we make in the world dissolves in the church, we are all equal and united in our identity as God’s children.

There was a prayer in Israel in the first century that went like this:

“Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast not made me a foreigner.

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast not made me a slave.

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast not made me a woman.”⁴

This is the thinking that Paul was trying to overcome to get people to see one other as fellow heirs in Christ. They were so used to ranking themselves by these other factors and keeping distance from one another in life that they would naturally bring those hierarchies into the church. But Paul wanted them to see beyond those things and have all believers embrace one another as one in Christ. The world may celebrate the CEO over the common laborer, but in church they should be treated equally. Being in Christ transcends our social categories. We’re all co-heirs in the great eternal family of God.

In the last four verses, Paul strengthens his argument by showing that

III. In the Plan of God We Are Adopted As Sons (4:4-7)

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.

“*When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son.*” This is the way Paul explains the timing surrounding Jesus’ incarnation, His taking on a human form on that first Christmas morning. It was the “perfect timing” for God’s great redemptive plan. There had been 400 years since the end of the Old Testament writings and the Jewish people were longing for the Messiah that had been promised.

³ Ryken, p. 152.

⁴ Timothy George, *Galatians* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), p. 285.

The Greeks had established a common language and culture. The *Pax Romana*, or Peace of Rome, had come to the area around Israel and made it easier for both the ministry of Jesus to take place without a war going on, and for the gospel to go out all over the world with the roads and infrastructure that Rome had built. (“Long lay the world in sin and error pining til He appeared.”)

Verse 4 also says that Jesus was born of a woman and born under the law. Jesus didn’t just float down from the sky or suddenly appear in a manger. He had to be born under the law, so Jesus had to undergo our birth process. He was born to a mother, Mary, and was therefore fully human so that He could represent us in our humanity and the curse of the law. But He was also fully divine, fully God and never sinned, so that He fulfilled the law on our behalf. That’s what enabled Him “*to redeem those who were under the law,*” as verse 5 says.

And what else did that accomplish? According to this passage, Christmas happened so that God could adopt us as His children. We are redeemed in Christ, in other words, He pays the price of our condemnation, so that we can be free and clear to be adopted into His family. Isn’t everyone a child of God? No, in our natural state, we are enemies with God. We must have our sin dealt with, be made righteous in His sight for us to be given the rights and privileges of children.

As J.I. Packer emphasizes: “Adoption is *the highest privilege that the gospel offers*: higher even than justification. This may cause raising of eyebrows, for justification is the gift of God on which since Luther evangelicals have laid the greatest stress, and we are accustomed to say, almost without thinking, that free justification is God’s supreme blessing to us sinners... Justification is the *primary* blessing, because it meets our primary spiritual need... we need the forgiveness of sins and assurance of a restored relationship with God more than we need anything else in the world... but this is not to say that justification is the *highest* blessing of the gospel... Adoption is higher, because of the richer relationship with God that it involves.”⁵

Paul says that we are all sons; that’s not using sexist language or saying that only males are God’s heirs. In the ancient world, sons inherited everything from their fathers. By calling all those who are saved in Christ sons, Paul is saying that all people, male and female, inherit the riches of God. And what a great contrast there is: in the Old Testament, the Israelites trembled with fear when the law was given in Exodus 19. They knew that anyone who touched the mountain where God was would die, and they begged Moses to speak to God for them because they were afraid. That was the relationship of the people to God through the law. How different the picture of our relationship with God through Christ. Look at verse 6 again: “*God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’*” “Abba” means Daddy. We call our Heavenly Father “Daddy” with great joy.

Conclusion

Here’s another illustration from Wayne Rice that might help you understand the contrast between the old and new covenant, between faith and works: “A woman was married to a perfectionist husband. No matter what his wife did for him, it was never enough. At the beginning of each day, he would make out his list of chores for her to do, and at the end of each day, he would scrutinize it to make sure she had done all that she was supposed to do. He never complimented her, just expected perfection. She grew to hate her husband, and when he died unexpectedly, she realized that she was relieved. She met a warm and loving man not long after, and they fell deeply in love with each other and got married. Every day they spent together seemed better than the day before. One afternoon, as she was cleaning out boxes in the attic, a crumpled piece of paper caught her eye. It was one of the old chore

⁵ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1973), pp. 186-7.

lists that her first husband used to make out for her... As she read it, she realized with amazement that she did all of the things on the list now. But she did not do them because her husband demanded them from her, she did them because she loved him.”⁶

As Christians, we have NT Scriptures that tell us to walk in obedience to Christ, to restrain from indulging our fleshly passions, and to choose good and not evil. But like the woman in this illustration, when believers were under the law, they were still condemned and could never do enough to satisfy the law. But now that we are under grace and saved in Christ, we do the things He’s asked of us out of love and thankfulness. We are already saved, we have already found favor in God’s sight, we’re not earning salvation by obeying Him. But we delight in pleasing Him with our obedience. In one analogy, we are the bride of Christ, that He cherishes with His covenant, everlasting love. In another analogy, the one we’ve looked at today, we are His adopted children that He lavishes His love upon – 1 John 3:1a – *“See what kind of love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God.”*

Several of us from the church were in attendance at an adoption ceremony last month. A family we know officially finalized the adoption of their daughter. It was a beautiful day and everything went smoothly for that family. They weren’t the last family, though. One more family came forward with a dad and mom and what looked like six teenagers. The judge introduced them and explained that the family had adopted a boy many years ago, but that the boy’s greatest wish in life was to be reunited with his older brother. The judge didn’t explain exactly why the older brother hadn’t been adopted yet as well, but clearly there were some tough issues, probably with their birth family, to overcome. As the judge kept talking, she had to compose herself several times as she started to tear up because the day had finally come for the older brother’s adoption. People in the audience were crying, the family was getting teary, and the judge could barely make it through her speech because she was so glad that these boys were finally together, united in this new family. And it hit me while I was sitting there that this was a small picture of the Gospel. That the judge in charge of this case not only declared this boy’s legal status, but with great love saw to it that he was adopted into a new family. The judge was moved with love and great care that he was delivered from darkness of his previous situation into the light of a new family that loves him. It’s an incomplete picture as all Gospel parallels are, because in the Gospel, the judge is also the father of the family. But the point is Ephesians 1:5: *“In love He (God) predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will.”*

What a wonderful thing to remind ourselves at Christmastime: that before Jesus came, God dealt with His people by giving the law as their guardian. They weren’t free, they were imprisoned, even as they were safe in His covenant promises. But Christ came to set us free from both sin and the law. He kept the law perfectly and redeemed us, presenting us pure and righteous before His Father. And God the Judge pronounces us just in His sight and turns our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh that respond to His spirit, embracing the gift of faith in His Son. And then He takes off His judge’s robes and hands us our adoptions papers, promising that we will live forever in heaven with Him. Merry Christmas, Amen.

Benediction - Romans 16:25-27- *“Now to Him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith – to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.”*

⁶ Wayne Rice, *Hot Illustration for Youth Talks 4* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 60-61.