



THE GIFT OF SONSHIP

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Galatians 4:4-7

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*O come, O come Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel.*

*Come, Thou long-expected Jesus
Born to set Thy people free.*

The message of Christmas is the message of freedom. Freedom can mean different things to different people, however. Biblically speaking, freedom is not the ability to do whatever we want; it's the freedom to become what God intends us to be. Even here in the "land of the free," no one is born free. We are born into the world completely dependent on our parents. Growing up, we develop a whole host of dependencies—things like the love of money, power, prestige, academic and athletic achievements, and peer approval. We depend on these to give us a sense of worth. As we get older, we may turn to alcohol, drugs, pornography, sexual and food addictions. The result is that we don't have any freedom at all; we're tied up in knots. Something inside us tells us what kind of people we ought to be, but we can't pull it off.

The apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians tells us how we can be the people God intends. This is the letter that inflamed the heart of Martin Luther. It was the source for the German phase of the Reformation. Luther, a monk, tried very hard to be good and to find God, but he couldn't—that is, until he read the book of Galatians. Then he discovered that he didn't have to be good, that God didn't expect him to clean up his life and try to be better. God wanted to do that for him!

Some of us have a distorted view of God and the Christian life. Mine was built on my difficult childhood. My father died when I was 11 months old, and my mother raised my two older brothers and me by herself. Mother never quite recovered from the void of my father's death; she drank heavily. Dad died around Christmas, so the holidays were always difficult for us. Even though I believed in God, I thought of him as a judge, not a loving Father.

Some people view God as a cranky old uncle they have to tiptoe around. That's why there are so many rules, they say—because God doesn't want to be upset, and he won't like us unless we're good. But that isn't true. Our salvation depends on God, and our sanctification, too. Our part is to simply cooperate with what God is doing.

For our Advent preparations, we are going to look at four verses from chapter 4 of Galatians; then we will share the Lord's Supper together.

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God. (Gal 4:4-7, NASB)

"But when the fullness of the time came." Eugene Peterson paraphrases, "But when the time arrived that was set by God the Father." God had a plan. When Adam and Eve made that fatal choice that threw the world into sin, right then, God promised that there was One coming who would set everything right. Throughout the whole Old Testament, as C.S. Lewis says, "the leaves rustle with hope." A man is coming. A savior is coming. He will be a Semite. He will be an Israelite. He will be of the tribe of Judah. He will be one of David's descendants. He will be born in Bethlehem. He will live in Nazareth. He will sojourn in Egypt. He will suffer and die. He will rise again. All of that is in the Old Testament. Everyone looked forward to the One who was coming. This is what makes sense out of all the bits and pieces of the Old Testament. It is not a collection of homilies, moral principles and stories, even if that is how most people read it. The core that gives cohesion to the Old Testament is this idea of promise. God promised that some day the seed would come to save the world. We must fix on that promise—and at Christmas we celebrate its fulfillment.

In our text, Paul says that God's purpose in sending his Son was to redeem and adopt. God rescued us from slavery, turning slaves into sons. Jesus came to set us free from the burden of the law. Many in Paul's day misunderstood and misused the law, as do many today. A group of people followed Paul around, preying on new believers who were enjoying their freedom in Christ and attempting to put them back under the law. These people felt that the law was the means by which people made their way to God; that God desired law-abiding citizens who kept the law impeccably, and in doing so gained his pleasure. But the law was never intended to justify us. The law didn't work for Israel, and it won't work for us.

Many believers think that there are two methods of salvation taught in the Bible. They imagine that in the Old Testament, people were saved by keeping the law, but in the New Testament, they are saved by faith. But no. From the beginning, God has acted out of grace. What is required from us is faith. It has always been so.

Paul takes great pains to point to Abraham as the "Exhibit A" of faith. Abraham lived in Ur of the Chaldees, in the Mesopotamian Valley, around 2000 B.C. He was a pagan, descended from a family of idolaters, probably moon worshipers. He apparently had a heart for God, but didn't know God. Then God appeared to Abraham and spoke to him one day. He told him to go to a land that he would show him. He told him, "Trust me, and I will get you to the right place. I am going to bless your life and make you a blessing, and through you, the whole world will be blessed." At age 75, Abraham responded to God's call. He set out, without a map, trusting God to lead him to a land he had never seen, and God brought him over to the land that we call Israel today.

One night God took Abraham to the top of a mountain and pointed to the countless millions of stars. That evening, God promised Abraham that he would have more children than the stars of the heavens! At that point in his life Abraham had no children. Furthermore, he was impotent. Genesis says that his body was dead, and Sarah had already passed through the change of life. But, Abraham trusted God. He knew that God was able to bring something out of nothing, as Paul writes later in the chapter.

Abraham was 85 now. He would be 100 years old before the child was conceived. He faced the facts squarely, but he had confidence in God. The text says that when God gave him the promise, he looked up and said, "Amen." He didn't know how God would do it, but he believed. And God said, "You are a righteous man." It was Abraham's faith, not his godliness, not his religious performance, that saved him. Faith has always been the way.

It wasn't until the 15th century B.C. that the law was given. Earlier in Galatians, Paul says that the law was given "because of transgressions." The purpose of the law is to point out what sin is. Without the law our natural tendencies are so much a part of us that we don't even know they constitute transgression. That is a huge problem today. People don't know what is good and true and beautiful anymore. They don't know the difference between right and wrong. Modern society has very few standards or norms. The norm is, whatever the majority of people want. Is teenage sex acceptable? Who knows? Is gay good? Who knows? People don't have any way of telling whether these seemingly natural inclinations are good or bad.

So the law was given in order to objectify sin. Paul elaborates on this in Romans 3:20: "because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight;

for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin." He elaborates further, in 7:7: "What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "You shall not covet." It is natural to want things. It is natural to desire your neighbor's wife. It is natural to want to destroy the reputation of your competitors. These things come so easily to our minds that we would not know they were wrong unless the law spelled it out for us. So the law turns our natural inclinations into sin and objectifies it for us.

But the law goes further. In Romans 7, Paul says that it actually stirs up sin within us. The law not only tells us what is wrong, it makes us want to do wrong. The law is like a spoon that stirs up sediment lying at the bottom of a glass of water. The law stirs up all that awfulness in us. All of us have had that experience of looking into the law—which, in effect, is looking into the face of God, because the law is the pure expression of the character of God—and then wanting to disobey.

So the main purpose of the law is to expose sin. It is the law that turns sin into "transgression," revealing sin for what it is, a breach against "the holy law of God." The law was intended to make plain the sinfulness of sin as a revolt against the will and authority of God. It was never intended to make us good. It never made anyone good. As Paul puts it in another place, the problem is not the law. The law is good and beautiful and just. It is the pure expression of the character of God. The problem is with us. The law simply manifests what we are really like. But it can't cure us. It just makes us look bad.

In chapter 3 of Galatians, Paul likens the law to a prison in which we are held captive. It keeps us confined so that we can't escape. It tells us what God's will is, what we should and should not do. It warns us about the penalties for disobedience. It rebukes us and punishes us. But the wonderful news of this passage is that the oppressive work of the law was meant to be temporary, that ultimately it was meant not to hurt us but to bless us. Its purpose was to shut us up in prison until Christ should set us free. It was added, as Paul says earlier in Galatians, until the seed should come to whom the promise had been made. Thus, the law looked on to Christ, Abraham's seed, as the One through whom transgression would be forgiven.

Luther forcefully summarizes this truth in this way: "The principal point...of the law...is to make men not better but worse; that is to say, it shows them their sin, that by the knowledge thereof they may be humbled, terrified, bruised and broken, and by this means may be driven to seek grace, and so to come to that blessed Seed (i.e. Christ)."¹ John Stott wisely points out that this progression, from the promise through the law to the fulfillment of the promise, is more than just a history lesson of the Jewish nation and the Old Testament; it is the biography of every believer. Every one of us is ei-

ther held captive by the law, because we are still awaiting fulfillment of the promise, or delivered from the law because we have received the promise. Everyone is either living in the Old Covenant or the New Covenant; you derive your religion either from Moses or from Jesus. You are either “under law” or “in Christ.”²

Stott continues:

God’s purpose for our spiritual pilgrimage is that we should pass through the law into an experience of the promise. The tragedy is that so many people separate them by wanting one without the other. Some try to go to Jesus without first meeting Moses. They want to skip the Old Testament, to inherit the promise of justification in Christ without the prior pain of condemnation by the law. Others go to Moses and the law to be condemned, but they stay in this unhappy bondage. They are still living in the Old Testament. Their religion is a grievous yoke, hard to be borne. They have never gone to Christ, to be set free.³

Man’s bondage under the law lasted about fifteen hundred years. When the law had accomplished its intended purpose, God sent his son. He came to redeem us, to set us free from the burden of the law. The apostle says that Jesus was perfectly qualified for this redemptive work. Jesus was God’s son, preexistent, and yet, born of a human mother, Mary. He was human as well as divine, the one and only God-man. And he was born “under the law,” into a Jewish home, subject to Jewish law. Throughout his life he submitted to all of the requirements of the law. He was the only man to live a perfectly righteous life. He perfectly fulfilled the righteousness of the law, which qualified him to be man’s redeemer.

In a few moments we will celebrate the Lord’s Supper, remembering how our redemption was achieved. Jesus’ death on the cross gave us our freedom. His sacrifice redeemed us from the curse of the law. He himself took that curse. He accepted the guilt of our sin. He bore in his righteous person the curse of judgment which our sins deserve. He paid the price for us, so we are no longer cursed. What we get is the blessing, the justification promised to Abraham. So we are no longer slaves, but sons and daughters.

The Christian life is the life of sons and daughters, not the life of slaves. It is a life of freedom, not bondage. Our salvation no longer hangs in the balance; it’s not dependent on our slavish obedience to the letter of the law. It depends on the finished work of Christ, on his sin-bearing death, which we embrace by faith.

Yet many people live their Christian lives as though they were slaves. They think that if they read their Bible more, or pray more, or become more involved in ministry, that God will be pleased with them. Even John Wesley confessed that this was his experience. Wesley was the child of a pastor. Following his studies at Oxford, he became a pastor himself. He was a rigorous student, careful in his orthodoxy. He lived a devout life, filled

with good works. He and his friends visited prisons, provided slum children with food and clothes, an education, even. They observed Saturday as the Sabbath, as well as Sunday. They gave alms, studied diligently, and fasted regularly. But they were bound in the chains of their own religious effort. At last Wesley came to trust in Christ alone for his salvation. Looking back on those years, he confessed that he really was trusting in himself and his righteousness, not Christ. He wrote, “I had even then the faith of a servant, though not that of a son.”⁴ Christianity is a religion of sons, not slaves.

Paul says that God not only sent his son, he sent his Spirit as well. The verbs in verses 6 and 4 are not only the same, they have the same tense. God sent his son into the world, and he sent his Spirit into our hearts. And, entering our hearts, the Spirit immediately cries, “Abba! Father!” Or, as Romans 5 puts it, when we cry out, “Abba! Father!” the Spirit himself is testifying with our spirit that we are children of God. Abba is an Aramaic word, the language of first century Palestine and the native speech of Jesus when he was on earth. It means father, but in an informal, intimate sense. Our nearest equivalent would be Daddy or Papa.

In Christ we are introduced to a unique familiarity with God. Nowhere in the Old Testament is God addressed as father. He is described as a father in various places, but he is never addressed that way. But Jesus always addressed God in this way; the way children address their fathers in everyday language. When we become sons and daughters, we receive this unique privilege of intimacy.

Eugene Peterson comments:

Suddenly we are free with God, like a child is free with a parent. We are not involved in stiff, formal protocols in relation to God. We don’t have to be afraid lest we put our foot in our mouth, or embarrass ourselves, or get sent out of the room because we didn’t use the right title. We can address God as freely as we address our parents. It is the kind of freedom that combines intimacy with reverence. We are still aware of the majesty and awesome glory of God. We do not try to reduce God to a level of coziness where we can manipulate him. The intimacy is a freedom to share ourselves, to express ourselves fearlessly in God’s presence. We are free to be spontaneous, personal, and uninhibited. Faith is not a formal relationship hedged in with elaborate courtesies; it is a family relationship, intimate and free.⁵

The Father not only wants us to understand our sonship, but to experience it and know the assurance of it. That is the role of the Spirit in our lives: He makes Jesus real. He assures us of our sonship, of the intimate and affectionate relationship we have with our Father, and prompts us to pray, using the language of sons, not slaves.

One author who helps me understand God as a loving father is Brennan Manning, who was once a Catho-

lic priest. Listen to a quote I found some time ago from an interview with him:

The only way to survive is to know that God loves me as I am and not as I should be, that He loves me beyond worthiness and unworthiness, beyond fidelity and infidelity; that He loves me in the morning sun and in the evening rain, without caution, regret, boundary, limit, or breaking point; that no matter what I do, He can't stop loving me. When I am really in conscious communion with the reality of the wild, passionate, relentless, stubborn, pursuing, tender love of Christ for me, then it's not that I have to, or I've got to, or I must, or I should, or I ought: suddenly, I want to change because I know how deeply I'm loved.

I have a good little friend, a 55-year-old nun named Mary Michael O'Shaughnessy, who has a doctorate in theology. She has a banner on her wall that says, "Today I will not should on myself." One of the wonderful results of my consciousness of God's staggering love for me as I am, is a freedom not to be who I should not be or who others want me to be. I can be who I really am. And who I am is a bundle of paradoxes and contradictions: I believe and I doubt, I

trust and I get discouraged, I love and I hate, I feel bad about feeling good, I feel guilty if I don't feel guilty. Aristotle said we are rational animals. I say I am an angel with an incredible capacity for beer. It is the real me that God loves. I don't have to be anyone else. For twenty years I tried to be Brother Teresa. I tried to be Francis of Assisi. I had to be a carbon copy of a great saint rather than the original God intended me to be. A black evangelical preacher from Georgia once said, "Be who you is, because if you ain't who you is, you is who you ain't."

The biggest mistake I can make is to say to God, "Lord, if I change, you will love me, won't you?" The Lord's reply is always, "Wait a minute, you've got it all wrong. You don't have to change so I'll love you; I love you, so you'll change." I simply expose myself to the love that is everything, and have an immense, unshakable, reckless, raging confidence that God loves me so much, He'll change me and fashion me into the child that He always wanted me to be.

My prayer for you this Christmas is that that you will understand and receive this gift of an intimate relationship with your loving heavenly Father, and experience the joy and freedom of being his son or daughter.

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1. James Clarke, *Martin Luther, Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (Cambridge, 1953), 316.
2. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1968), 95.
3. Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, 95-96.
4. John F. MacArthur, *Liberated for Life* (Ventura, CA: John F. MacArthur, G/L Publications, 1976), 78-79.
5. Eugene H. Peterson, *Traveling Light* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988), 117.