
The Lord's Table at Advent

Galatians 4:1-7

We have been thinking much over the idea of what God has been doing in history. We refer to this as redemptive history. At the center of redemptive history is what we celebrate in this time of year. We call this Christmas, a name given to it by Catholicism, Christ Mass. We can also call it Advent. Advent is that time when God the Son came into the world and took on human flesh, becoming a man. This is the incarnation.

I have chosen to look at this text through the lens of Advent. This wonderful text gives us one (out of the many) purposes for Jesus being born. It is about our sonship, our receiving the fullness of Christ's inheritance and its so very great privileges.

The subject of our text comes in its connection to the context. Listen to **Galatians 3:23–29**

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, 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.

In verse 29. we see three very important things in this sentence.

THERE IS A CONDITION: we must be in Christ. Being in Christ is Paul's way of talking about our salvation. In Christ makes our salvation centered on Him, located in Him, all about Him.

THERE IS A RELATION: we are Abraham's offspring. All true sons of God are descendants of Abraham by faith and by being in Christ, Abraham's true son.

THERE IS A FULFILLMENT: heirs according to promise. What God promised, He has given as an inheritance to those true offspring.

So, what has this to do with Jesus' birth? Well, just about everything. Let's think through what Paul is showing us and then revel in what Jesus has done for us.

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. 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.

Illustration from Life

(v.1-2)

To show us what a great thing it is that Jesus' advent and incarnation have done for us, Paul uses an illustration that would have been common in his day. Because we have no word for this in our culture, the word "adoption" is used. So, we must be careful to explain what Paul is referring to unless we read our meaning of the word adoption back into this illustration.

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The Status of the Heir

It has been common to most cultures to recognize that children cannot be given the full and free exercise of authority over their inheritance until they reach a certain age. Even in our own culture, it is normal for a will to state that if both parents die while the children are in their minority, they will have a guardian who will take care of them and be their legal parent until the proper age. Usually, we do not pass on our inheritance or give our sons and daughters the power over their inheritance while we are still living.

However, in the culture of Paul's day, there were some very important differences. Children, particularly of wealthy parents, were under tutors and stewards while they were young. As it relates to their inheritance and sometimes even in their personal relationship to their parents, they often were no different than the household slaves even though they were the potential heirs. This is what Paul is referring to in verses 1 and 2.

Paul points out that they were under guardians who watched over them personally and managers (trustees) who watched over the estate until a time set by the father. The Jewish culture had a certain age for this as did the Greeks. The Romans gave the father absolute discretion to set the time for the formal, public recognition of sonship when the child was released from his guardians and trustees.

The Time of Adoption

This time when a minor child was publicly acknowledged in his full sonship is called literally, "son-placing". Most English translations use the word, "adoption" to represent that Greek word. Now, we can immediately see that we need to be careful. We generally use adoption to refer to bringing someone not in our own child into our family and making them our own. But this is not what "adoption" is in the Bible. Adoption is when a father formally and publicly acknowledges his heir and begins to give him all the privileges that go with it.

So Paul is doing two very important things:

He is highlighting the status of minor children and the very great thing of being recognized as heirs.

He is highlighting the absolute authority of the father to set the time and conditions of that public acknowledgement.

Incarnation in Time

(v.3-5)

Now, in verses 3-5, Paul takes that illustration to help us understand what God has done in redemptive history to give his children their full sonship. Without stealing the text's thunder, this is going to have a "big picture" as well as a "personal story" application.

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.

Problem of our Past Condition

(v.3)

Like the illustration, those who lived as God's children before Christ came were true sons, but they were under tutors and governors. They were waiting for a time when they would be brought into the full recognition of their sonship. Paul, referring to both the Old Covenant believer and the New Covenant person who was converted, speaks of their being in subjection, enslaved to the basic or elemental principles. This difficult phrase in Paul refers to the pre-cross experience of both Israel and believers.

Israel, before the Lord came, was subject to the power and principles of the Law. Living under the Law, even true believers, true sons, did not yet have the full rights and privileges of sonship. They were enslaved to basic elements of true religion, that is, the Law.

Gentile believers also were in this condition before they were converted. They also were in the world, in the flesh and under law. They were not even true sons yet. They were enslaved to the basic elements of their pagan religions. Paul is here equating the pre-cross experience of both believing Jews and unbelieving Gentiles.

Provision through Christ's Coming

(v.4)

But, God moved to resolve this problem. Christmas is about God sending His Son into the world at the fullness of time, at the peak of redemptive history. Here is what we celebrate in the Lord's Advent.

God sent forth His Son. Jesus comes as both a sovereign initiative of God and as a voluntary act of submission. God sends and He submits. His will is totally one with His father's, yet it is His own will. The time and place of this sending of the Son is the Father's choice. He set and determined the time and conditions.

Further, in sending His Son, He also publicly acknowledges Him as His own sons. If there are going to be the public acknowledgment of joint-heirs, there must first be

the public status of the firstborn. So, both at His baptism and at the Transfiguration, God the Father announces that Jesus is His beloved Son, the one with whom He is well pleased. Here is Jesus' adoption – the time when He is affirmed by the Father and acknowledged to a son, an heir, in full standing.

He is born of a woman. Here is the only New Testament reference to the virgin birth outside of the gospels. Jesus is virgin born. In by-passing Adam, Jesus is born without Adam's condemnation or being in Adam. He is fully human, because He is born of Mary. He is without sin in that He has no earthly biological father. He is deity because He has a true heavenly Father. Like all of us, he is born of a woman. Yet, unlike all of us, He is without sin.

He is born under the Law. This is a very important phrase. It means that He is born when in redemptive history the Law is still in force. He is born in the Old Covenant. And He is the beginning of the New Covenant. Jesus Himself is the transition between the two ages, the Old and the New. He is also born under the Law in the sense that He lives a fully human life in the midst of fallenness. He is truly human. He suffers in the world. He is tempted, just we are. He is living a wholly righteous life in the midst of the mess. Being under the Law in both redemptive history and in the sphere of fallenness then qualifies Him to be the one whose obedience unto death bears the curse of the Law and brings the blessing of righteousness.

He is born of a woman, born under Law, to redeem those under the Law. He enters the world and is under the Law because Israel is in the world and under the Law. He also enters the world and is under the Law because each one of us is until the moment of our conversion. (If you did not hear last Sunday night's sermon, you really need to get it off the web, read carefully and study the charts in it.) While we are born after the cross in redemptive history, we are in fact still born in the world, in the flesh and under the Law. This "to redeem" here is an allusion to the redeeming of a slave. The owner was paid a price and the slave was set free. We were enslaved to the Law; Jesus has come and has purchased from being under and enslaved to the Law so that we may live fully and freely as sons.

Privilege in our Adoption

(v.5)

Verse 5 then makes a purpose statement in which a great privilege is embedded. Now that we have been redeemed from the Law, both Israel in redemptive history and you and I in our personal history, we may now be fully and freely acknowledged as sons, as heirs of God. Remember how this text started. If we are in Christ, then we are Abraham's descendents and heirs according to promise (not according to Law – the argument of the Galatians.)

What a great privilege it is. We have been born into God's family and are true sons. But, because of what Jesus has done in coming into the world, living and dying under the Law, He has set us free by taking us out and setting us apart from that old realm. Now, as sons, both Jew and Gentile, we inherit along with Christ all the God has promised Him.

One of the reasons Paul says this is to underscore his argument about the finality and fulfillment and finished nature of the Law for believers. If we are adopted as sons, freeing us from the tutorship and governance of the Law, why would we go back to that rather than enjoying the freedom and fullness of being in Christ? Now I am not saying that this liberty frees us to sin. Quite the contrary (Romans 6-8). This liberty enables us to live holy lives as sons in way that is not possible under the Law.

Implications for Believers

(v.6-7)

Because we are sons, there are some very real and practical implications affecting all of us. So Paul now shifts from a primary focus on redemptive history to primary focus on personal history. He is looking at what God has done for us in our own personal history. This is the repeated structure of Galatians: God has a plan in redemptive history that is reflected in and interprets your personal history. Your story is part of and explained by the big story.

Recipients of the Spirit

Because we are children, God has sent the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of His Son, into our hearts. Jesus is sent into the world to live among men. The Spirit is sent into the world to live in men. Both of these acts are done to bring us into our full sonship. Here is an objective truth to be believed. I am born into the family and I am a full heir of God in Christ in full standing.

Receiving the Holy Spirit is often portrayed in the New Testament as one of the fulfillments of the Abrahamic promise (Acts 2). Notice the relationship between being offspring of Abraham and recipients of the promise. Here we are sons and therefore receive the Spirit. Because being in Christ makes us the offspring, then we have received the Spirit as a matter of our inheritance (as well as many other reasons and connections in the Bible).

The Holy Spirit enables a personal response arising from what we believe. He sends the Spirit into our hearts who is the one crying, "Abba, Father." Our adoption as sons, our being recognized as full heirs with Christ, not only brings us the privileges of that inheritance, but it also makes us true descendants. In a reversal of the order in 3:29, the true offspring of Abraham now approach God with a deep, personal intimacy. I get this from the use of the word, "Abba". As one writer has put it, "The word 'Abba' is the Aramaic word for 'Father.' It is the diminutive form used by small children in addressing their fathers. It is appropriate to see its similarity to the English word 'Daddy.' Used by Christ (cf. Mark 14:36), this familiar form indicates intimacy and trust as opposed to the formalism of legalism." [*The Bible Knowledge Commentary*].

Recognition as Sons

This recognition as sons means that we are no longer a slave. We are not longer enslaved to the power or principles of the world, of being in Adam and under the Law. We are no longer under those tutors and guardians. Not because they are not necessary in their time and place, they are. Rather, because we have been delivered from

the sphere in which they exercise their power and authority. Now that we are in Christ, we are true sons indeed.

Therefore, as he will go on to say in verses 8-20, do not go back to trying to live as though you are still in that sphere. Do not try to have a legal righteousness. Do not put yourself back under the Law. Part of this message is to Gentiles as well not to go back to trying to cope with the fallenness we live in with the principles from the world we have been delivered from. You see, going back to living by the world's counsel in psychology, for example, is more than just integration. It is an unbelieving retreat from the truth of living in Christ to living back under the elemental principles of the world.

Why would we do that? Why go back? Why listen to the voices that call us and counsel us to go back? When we do, it becomes a tacit denial of our sonship and our receiving of the Spirit. If we are sons and if we have received the Spirit, then let us live in the realm of grace where we experience intimacy with our heavenly Father and walk in the Spirit. We are then living in the realm where nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. In other words, we move into the life of Romans 8.

Brothers and sisters, here is something to celebrate in this Advent, this Christmas season. God sent His Son into world, to be born of a woman, to be born under the Law, that is, to be born as a perfectly holy man in the fallen world where sin reigns and the Law rules so that we might be redeemed from, delivered out of and set free from that realm. Now that He has been fully and publicly acknowledged to be the well pleasing Son of the Father, the heir of all that God promised in the covenants, we can also be adopted. We have been fully acknowledged to be sons so that we receive the Spirit giving us union with Christ and intimacy with the Father and liberty to be holy!

Reflect and Respond

He left glory that we might share in heaven; He became a child that we might become sons; He died that we might live; He lived under the Law that we might live in grace; He became part of the human family that we might become part of the Divine family.; He was born of a woman that we might be born of the spirit; He became a servant that we might no longer be slaves; He was sent in order that we might come; He came to Jerusalem that we might come to Zion; He was wrapped in swaddling clothes that we might be robed in righteousness; He became helpless to deliver the hopeless; He became an infant that we might mature in grace; He looked up into the face of an earthly mother that we might look up into the face of a Heavenly Father; He lay in a manger that we might stand before the Throne; He reached down to us that we might reach out to others.

O, come let us adore Him!

O, come let us worship Him as we share the Lord's Table.