

Galatians 4:4-7 Early AM

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[0 : 0 0] Lord Jesus, we gather together in the dark today, in the darkest time of the year, and we look to you and ask that you would enlighten us, enlighten our hearts, as we look at what your coming to us means.

And we pray that we will glimpse afresh, anew, or maybe in new ways this morning, through your word, how it is that you love us and what you've done for us.

And we pray this in your name. Amen. Go ahead and grab a seat. So every year, the St. John staff does something called a white elephant gift exchange.

Have you ever done a white elephant gift exchange? This looks like it's a new idea to you. It's horrendous. Well, that's how I feel about it.

I think most people love it. It's essentially a random gift exchange. So everyone brings a gift without any kind of names or markings on it. And some of the gifts are tea and chocolate and things that are nice.

[1 : 1 1] And others are basically pranks in a box. They're jokes. They're joke gifts. And so everyone ends up with something they either don't want or something they don't deserve.

Something very nice or something very, very terrible. And the reversals make it very fun. So very often the people that bring thoughtful gifts go home with something terrible. And the pranksters go home with something really nice, which isn't fair at all.

And our passage from Galatians this morning is speaking about just this sort of exchange. It's at the heart of our faith. It's at the heart of Christmas. It's what John Calvin called the wondrous exchange. And I'm going to read just a little bit about what he says as an opener. I would never let my apprentices start a sermon with a John Calvin quote. But I don't think they're here. So this is what he says about the wondrous exchange.

Having become with us the Son of Man, Jesus has made himself a Son of God. Let me try that again.

[2 : 1 7] That didn't make any sense. Having become with us the Son of Man, Jesus has made us with himself sons of God. By his own descent to the earth, he has prepared our ascent to heaven.

Having received our mortality, he has bestowed on us his immortality. Having undertaken our weakness, he has made us strong in his strength.

Having submitted to our poverty, he has transferred to us his riches. Having taken upon himself the burden of unrighteousness with which we were oppressed, he has clothed us with his righteousness.

So it's this list, exchange upon exchange upon exchange, our rags for his riches. And this exchange is exactly what our passage from Galatians is talking about.

Jesus became a slave to make us sons. And now that we are sons, we can live as heirs. So those are my two points. Slaves to sons and sons to heirs.

[3 : 2 6] So slaves to sons. This is verse 4. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son. Now the best analogy, I think, for this is when a woman is pregnant, and her whole body is almost subjected, kind of taken captive to this purpose of the life within her.

And so the baby in the pregnancy will pull the very minerals from her bones as building blocks for the baby. And all of it is pushing towards the fulfillment, this fullness of time when the baby arrives. And this is similar to what this means here, the fullness of time that the passage speaks about. The great purpose of history is God's long journey with his disobedient people.

Their mistakes, all the miracles, the prophecies, all the promises of Advent. It's all filled up. It's made full in the sending of God's Son. When the fullness of time had come, God's Son arrives.

All of it bends towards Jesus. That's what it's saying. He comes just at the right time. But he also fulfills time. Everything points to Jesus. And so when our long-expected King of Kings comes, he's born of Mary, God's Son becomes human, lowly, the servant of all.

[4 : 45] So Jesus doesn't come. It's amazing. All of history essentially bends towards this moment when Jesus comes. And of course, he doesn't come as we expect. He comes in this lowly form.

And he doesn't come to save humanity from the outside in, just kind of pop down and tell us all what to do. But he comes from the inside out. He takes our humanity, our weakness, onto himself.

And this is what it means when it says that he's born of a woman. It means that he's fully human in every way that someone can be human. So he takes on our fragility.

He takes on physical decay. He takes on living in a society that's in decay, our aches and our pains and our grief. He's born of a woman. He's fully one of us.

But even more than that, he's born under the law. So this means that he puts himself not just in a human body, but in the human position of how we relate to God.

[5 : 43] So the human position, and this is what all of Galatians is about. I'll tell you in about a minute. You can tell me if it makes sense afterwards. So the human position was that we were waiting for God to fulfill his promise of salvation by faith, a promise that started in Abraham.

And in the meantime, while his people were waiting and waiting and waiting, God gives the law, and the law is supposed to teach and govern his people as they wait. But every single person failed to keep the law.

And because of that, the law became like a mirror to us. It revealed our sin, and it revealed our need for a savior. So all humanity by the law, we stand under it, and we see our wrongdoing.

But we can't correct it. And that's why Paul compares the law to slavery. Because it's this fruitless endeavor, where no matter how hard the slave works, they never earn any money, they never own more, they never have any more hope.

And this is what we're like under the law. The law itself is good, but no matter how hard we work, we never get closer to fulfilling it. I think it's like when people take on too much of a mortgage or too much debt, we call them debt slaves.

[6 : 55] And the idea is that they could never earn enough to escape the debt that they're in. And this is our position as we relate to the law. So God's law is good, but because of our lack, we can never rise above this position of being in slavery to it.

And Jesus comes into that position for us. So he doesn't only become human, he comes into the spot we're in, in terms of how we relate to God.

He takes on that as well. So just imagine the God of thunderous power and fright on the mountain, giving the law, and then 1,500 years or so later, he becomes a human, and he takes all of the requirements of that law on.

This law that was made for people that were just kind of waiting. Jesus didn't need a law to live a righteous life. Jesus is the word of God.

So the law is built, you could say, of bits and pieces of his nature. But Jesus places himself under the law. He places himself in the position we're in as slaves.

[7 : 58] And he does it in verse 5, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

So this is the wondrous exchange right there. Jesus becomes a slave for us to become sons. And it's important that we don't say sons and daughters here, because sonship here in Galatians, it's not about sex, it's about status.

So the son inherited the father's estate in Jewish law, and each of us have this inheritance in Jesus. We each share a piece of the same inheritance. It's Jesus' inheritance that we share.

All of us men and women have this standing of sonship before God. And just as Jesus stood in our stead, now we stand in his stead as we relate to God. Jesus, it says, redeemed us.

And this is a slavery word again. It's going to the market and buying a slave. So Jesus bought our freedom at the market, like slaves out of a marketplace, in order to adopt us and to make us God's sons.

[9 : 04] Jesus became what we were to make us what he is. And we know that the price of that redemption was obedience to death. So Jesus shares our frailty.

And then even with our frailty, and how hard life is for us, and how much pain and difficulty we face, Jesus lived perfectly. And he took on slavery, living under the law that no human could keep, but he

never disobeyed once.

He submitted himself to it fully, and showed us obedience. And he took on sin. And he died in our place. And that is the wondrous exchange. And so our Christmas gift to Jesus is frailty and slavery and sin.

That's what we bring to Jesus. And his gift to us is immortality and freedom and guiltlessness. It's this gift that he's placed into our hands. And I think that it's, even knowing all this, I think most of us have heard all of this before, but even knowing all of this, it's as if we've just peeked under a corner of the wrapping paper to see what's inside this gift that Jesus has given us.

And we can't even understand the fullness of how good it is. We understand it from personal experience, likely, although I'm sure we don't fully understand the extent of it, but we understand a little bit of the pain and the sin and the difficulty that we give to Jesus.

[10:27] But how could we ever understand what it is that Jesus has given to us? It's this project of eternity, I think. The rest of our lives in this project of eternity of trying to peer under that wrapping paper, begin to unwrap it, and understand what it is that Jesus has given us in his inheritance, that he's won for us.

And this is a little bit of what the second point is speaking to, which is not just being made sons, but moving from being sons to heirs. This is what verse 6 says.

Because you are sons, God has sent the spirit of his son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father. So we can look to Jesus and understand the exchange that's been made, that he has bought slaves and made sons out of them.

But it's important to remember that this didn't happen just somewhere outside of us. It's not that God sent Jesus to earth to do some paperwork, fulfill the bureaucracy, and we just kind of trust that everything regarding this inheritance is in a safety deposit box somewhere, and it's all going to, you know, come out the way that he promised.

There can be this distance sometimes in the way that we think about what Jesus has done for us. And yet this verse is saying, no, it's happened already. Your son's right now.

[11:51] You're already adopted. And the way that we know that is that we share the spirit of his son. So the same spirit that alights on Jesus in his baptism is now sent upon us, right?

God sends the spirit and says, this is my son with whom I am well pleased. And now the spirit comes upon each of us and God looks at us and says, this is my son with whom I am well pleased. But more than that, the spirit has been sent to our very hearts. And once the spirit is in our hearts, we cry out, we can't help it. Because we are made sons, we look to the father and we say, father. And the father and the son and the spirit who have been sharing this perfect joy and love through eternity, this perfect fellowship of unity and difference, three persons, one God, now they've, I don't know if you can say that God's changed, but they've grown, God has grown by claiming us as family.

It's amazing to think about. How could the eternal and perfect Trinity adopt and bring more people into that fellowship?

[13:07] That's what we're talking about here. God has claimed us as family. Begun to share the life of eternity with us now by his spirit. And so when you take up the words that Jesus taught us, our father in heaven, the father hears and looks at us and sees his child, sees a son.

And this ability that we've been given to trust, to have that faith, to call on God as our father, is the very first deposit of our inheritance.

And so this is the first little bit that God has given us of looking under that wrapping paper, right? As we can know in our hearts that God is our father.

And when we take these words on our lips and the spirit is in our heart, we're able to trust that these things are so.

And so I think this is both an assurance and a challenge. So it's an assurance because in our lives, we still see all this decay and sin and frailty and weakness. Our hands are a bit sooty with this thing that we're holding.

[14:22] The wrapping has become grubby because of who we are. But Jesus, or sorry, Paul draws our attention to that little flap again. He says, peek at what's inside the gift.

What's in there? Well, it's that moment when your heart leaps for joy to know that God is your father because Jesus has made it so. That's the spirit at work in your heart.

You're marked as God's own. And if the spirit is at work in your heart, it's only a matter of time. Things are beginning to change and it's slow and it's painful, but God will finish what he started. He's going to make adopted sons look like his only begotten son. Again, what an amazing thing to say. It feels like we can't even say that. How could we look like Jesus?

And that's what the spirit wants to do is to transform us to look like Jesus. So I think that's the assurance of the spirit being in our heart. But there's also a challenge here.

[15 : 20] And the challenge is simple. It's stop thinking like a slave. And this is part of the whole argument that Paul is making in Galatians. He says, Galatians, you've forgotten who you are.

This is what he says in verse seven. You are no longer a slave, but a son. And if a son, then an heir through God. So for the Galatians, it's as if they've been freed from prison and as soon as getting out of prison, they just carried on living like prisoners.

They've lost sight of who Jesus is and who they are. They've come back to the law, looking back to this old system for the way that they relate to God, who they are to God. It's very easy to do. We forget who we are to God, what we're meant to do.

All of a sudden, we're living like slaves. And what does that mean to live like a slave? Well, the slave does the littlest and the least. They resent hard work. They resent sacrifice.

After all, what will any of it gain them? It gains them nothing. But if you're a son, and therefore an heir, it means that every work, small and large, builds the kingdom that you're going to inherit.

[16 : 36] So your obedience to God is building his kingdom, which he is going to give to you. The heir knows that they're a shareholder in this, right?

They're not just a, they're not an outsider. They're someone that has an investment in what's going to happen. They're a shareholder in the glory of God. Everything that God is doing, all of his works, we're a shareholder in that.

Every sacrifice that we make is a seed to future glory. And so the vision of the heir isn't in the trench that they're digging. They're not looking at the trench and cursing the fact that they have to dig.

But they're thinking about the estate that's rising out of it, and their part in the future. They're actually building into the future. And so this is an invitation to think differently about our lives as Christians.

All we say and do, that as the Spirit is doing this slow work of finishing what he has started, we are participating in this grand and glorious vision that God is bringing to pass.

[17 : 38] So if you unwrap any gifts this Christmas, I hope you'll have gifts to unwrap. Remember the wondrous exchange that Christ has put sonship into your hands, his Spirit into your hearts, and that he's giving you an inheritance for the future.

Amen. Amen.