

Galatians 4:4-7 AM

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[0 : 00] Let us pray. Father, may the words of my mouth and the many meditations of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable, filled with the fragrance of your Son and the power of your Spirit, we pray.

In Jesus' name. Amen. You may be seated. I have a little theory about the source of the heresy in the newsletter. I think it has to do with the person who lit the candles.

We are in week four of a sermon series on the meaning of the incarnation. The word incarnation is just a Christian fancy word for God became human, took on human flesh. What does that mean for us? That's the question we're asking.

And in week one, we looked at, not Hebrews, but Philippians chapter two, and we looked particularly at the humility of the incarnation. What we see in Jesus is divine majesty in the form of human humility.

What would it look like if all the glory of God was a human being? Jesus. In week two, we looked at Matthew chapter one, and we looked at the presence and the promise of the incarnation.

[1 : 17] This Jesus was named twice. He will be called Emmanuel, which means God with us, and he will be called Jesus, which means God saves us, God with us to save us.

In week three, we looked at Luke chapter one. This was David. And we looked at the mighty mercy of the incarnation, the endless mercy of God for the humble and the hungry.

That's the only prerequisite is that you be humble and hungry. God unleashes all the might of his mercy upon you. And this week in Galatians chapter four, we look at the goal of the incarnation.

What does the incarnation achieve for us? Why is it good news for us? And the simple answer in Galatians chapter four is it makes us sons and daughters of God. The word is adoption.

Now, if you look, go to Galatians chapter four with me. If you're not there, it's in page 974 of your pew Bibles.

[2 : 13] And the astonishing thing about these verses is that it's the whole story of the Bible packed into four short verses. Paul starts off with, when the fullness of time came.

That's a little phrase that is summarizing the whole Old Testament. He sent forth his son, the incarnation, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who are under the law.

That's the crucifixion. That's how he redeems us. So that we might receive adoption as sons. And then because you are sons, verse six, God has sent the spirit of his son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father.

And then verse seven, you are no longer a son. You are a slave. And what does that mean? You are an heir with God, meaning you inherit all the riches of his goodness and his grace and his glory and eternity. So we literally have the whole Old Testament all the way to the glory of our future and the incarnation and Pentecost smashed into four short verses.

But the single theme that all the verses revolve around, so you might say then the single theme that Paul right here is exploring, that all of God's mighty works throughout all of salvation history revolve around are the theme of sonship.

[3 : 26] Did you notice how many times that language is used? He sent his son so that we might receive adoption as sons. He sent the spirit of his son so that we might cry out, Abba, Father, as his sons.

Now, I want to pause here on this language really quickly, because in our cultural moment, we can hear this as gender-exclusive language, right? We can go, well, what about all the daughters in our midst? Is this just a male-dominated religion that we're talking about here?

Now, it's important to understand that in the ancient world, there's a very specific reason why Paul is using the language of sonship and not saying like sons or daughters or using a more general term like children. It's because in the ancient world, two things were significant about sons that were

different than daughters.

It's number one, that the family lineage was passed down through sons. And number two, it's that sons were the ones, especially the firstborn son.

I'm a firstborn, so. The father's inheritance was passed on to the firstborn son when the father died. [4 : 36] So that meant that the son was the one that was carrying on the family name, and the son was the one that bore a special relationship to the father. He was going to inherit all the riches that the father had.

And Paul is saying that whether you are Jew or Greek, whatever your ethnicity, whether you are male or female, whatever sex you are, and he's saying whether you are a servant or a master, whatever position you are in socioeconomically, if you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you have what's equivalent to the status of a son spiritually in relationship to God the Father.

That's the point that Paul is making. And this was revolutionary in the ancient world. There's this book, I don't know if you've heard of it before, written by a sociologist, an academic sociologist named Rodney Stark.

It's called The Rise of Christianity. And it talks about how there's a shadow side to this privileging of sons in the ancient world. And one of those things is that some people were disappointed when they gave birth and they had a son, and they had a daughter and not a son.

And so what the early Christians did is they would often go out to the trash heaps or go out to the different places on the streets where some people would place their infant daughters to die because they were not worthy of keeping.

[5 : 56] And the Christians would go out, and they would grab them, and they would adopt them into their family, and they would raise them in their families as their own. Because Christians believed that at the core of the gospel was this sense of adoption.

And the privileges that God gives to his people, he wants to offer adoption to every single person. And it's this word adoption that is so significant.

Do you guys remember J.I. Packer? Anybody remember that guy? He was a part of our community for just a wee little bit. I think even longer than you. No? Did you outlive J.I. Packer?

Oh, that's good. That's good. David's been here for 100 years, he said. Yeah, that's good. And he's aiming for the next 100.

That's good. J.I. Packer, in his book Knowing God, he writes a chapter on this. It starts on page 200. It's about 25, 30 pages long, and you should read it.

[6 : 55] Go on Amazon after this and get it. And he says, if I were to summarize the whole New Testament in one word, it would be the word adoption. He says this.

I quote, What is a Christian? Maybe you're here today, and you're asking that question. What in the world? Who are these people? Or maybe you yourself have been a Christian for a while, but still wrestling.

And he says, The question can be answered in many ways, but the richest answer I know, says J.I. Packer, is that a Christian is one who has God as father. If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much they make of the thought of being God's child and having God as their father.

End quote. This is what captures Paul's heart and mind in Galatians chapter 4. This is what on the fourth Sunday of Advent God wants to capture our hearts and minds.

And it's important for us to get at the heart of this because during Christmas, what do we do? We have this inclination to gather with our families, right? And it's as we gather with our families that we realize that there's this deep longing for us to belong.

[8 : 06] And often when we gather for our families, it's when we realize that we have a lot of struggles with our families. Now, how many of you experience that sense of like, am I adopted? And I think God designed us to want to belong and ultimately to belong to him.

And what Paul talks about in Galatians chapter 4 is how God makes that possible and how he makes that a living reality in our hearts. There are two missions of God.

He sends his son and he sends his spirit and they relate to two aspects of our spiritual adoption, says Paul. The first is in verses 4 and 5. He says, God sent his son into our humanity so that we could receive the status of adoption.

Verse 4, when the fullness of time came, God sent forth his son. Notice here how God's salvation is timely.

Paul is suggesting that God is not slow to fulfill his promises, but he is very precise about the way he fulfills his promises. And Paul's also suggesting that Christ's coming, born as a human, wasn't like plan B.

[9 : 26] It wasn't like, oh, all the stuff I tried with Israel for thousands of years, that actually didn't work out. So I'm just going to have to come down as a human. It's actually saying that everything he did with Israel was all about plan A, which was sending Christ.

And he tells us three things about his son that he sends. The first is that he sent him. And the word here is really interesting. It's literally, it's not just he came forth, but he came out of God.

So it's saying that he is fully divine. He is coming from within the being of God, into the life, of humanity. The second thing is he was born of a woman.

So it's saying not only is he fully divine, he's fully human. And the third thing is he was born under the law, and note the phrase is repeated, to redeem those who are under the law.

So he's fully divine, he's fully human, and he is fully Jewish. Under the law. Now this is where things get a little bit interesting, and just a little bit tricky.

[10 : 23] Our passage, you're going to have to bear with me for about five minutes now. I'm just giving you a warning. But I hope it pays off for somebody. Our passage comes on the heels of a long discussion about the law.

I wish I could just ignore these two phrases because it's too complicated, but we can't. And I think there are three things to keep in mind. Leading up to this discussion in Galatians, Paul has been talking about three things.

Number one, he's been talking about God's promise to Abraham. I will bless you, Abraham, and I will bless all the nations of the world through your family. Promise to Abraham. The second thing is God gives his gift of the law to Moses.

Think, you shall worship no other gods before me. You shall honor your father and mother. You shall keep the Sabbath. All these things. So we have God's promises to Abraham, God's gift of law to Moses, and then we have God's redemption in Jesus Christ.

It's through faith alone, in Christ alone, by the grace of God alone that we are saved eternally. And Paul is trying to unpack for the Galatians, what's the relation between these three things?

[11 : 30] How do we understand the promises and the law and the salvation that we experience in Christ? What is the relation between these three things? And here's where the major problem comes in for the Galatians, is that some of the Jews in Galatia themselves believed or were convincing the other Gentiles and Greeks that they, in order for them to be saved and to be true children of God, to be true sons and daughters of God, they not only needed to have faith in Christ, but they also needed to obey the laws that God had given to Moses.

So it was a bit of a Jesus plus the law situation. And Paul in Galatians vehemently and passionately says, no. He says, you have misunderstood what the law was all about in God's salvation purposes. He says, even in the Old Testament, when I gave the law to my people, I never meant for them to believe that obedience to the law was the way in which they were going to be saved or the way in which they were going to be sanctified.

I wanted them to be distinctive in that way, but I always wanted them to believe that the way they were going to be saved is by faith in my promise to Abraham and that I am the God who fulfills my promise.

So it raises the question then for us, why did God actually give the law to the people in the Old Testament in the first place? And that's a question that Paul's wrestling with.

[12 : 54] And Paul says the law wasn't given in order to replace the promises of God or even in order to fulfill the promises of God to Abraham. The law was given to help prepare his people and point his people to their need for the fulfillment of those promises.

So the law, in other words, makes us aware in a way that we wouldn't be otherwise of our captivity to sin, of our proclivity and propensity for evil, and of our desperate need for a savior.

So let me give you a little example here. Take a little break. In the evenings with my children lately, we've been trying to learn how to pray together. They teach me as much about prayer as I teach them.

And there are three things that we tend to do. We tend to say, okay, each of us is going to say one thank you to God. We're going to choose one person to pray for to God. And we're going to say, I'm sorry for one thing to God.

And we just go around and we do that as children. And now, one of my children has a difficult time thinking of things to say I'm sorry for. I'll let you guess. I'm not going to use names. And it's pretty funny because my other child, who's slightly older, could probably list about 40 things that he has to say thank you for.

[14:16] Or say sorry for, you know. And so one time we were particularly stuck and we were trying to figure out how to get ourselves through the muck and muddle of not knowing what to say sorry for. And so the older child said, you know what, how about we work with the Ten Commandments?

So she started listing off the Ten Commandments, you know, in order, the whole thing. And this was great. I was like, thank you Sunday school. Thank you for that. And then it got to you shall not covet.

And the other child said, whoa, whoa, stop right there. What does that mean? And I said, you shouldn't want other people's stuff and you should be content with what God's given you. And he was like, wait, what?

That's impossible. So we knew what to pray for that night. I think that's how Paul believes the law works oftentimes.

It's a good gift of a holy and just God. But what it does that's good for us is it spiritually reveals where we're misaligned with God.

[15:23] And it convicts us of our need for him to save us. So in a sense, the law was given to us, I think Paul suggests in Galatians 3 and 4, so that we would know that our whole lives without God are imprisoned under sin.

That without his marvelous and magisterial grace, our whole lives are under the curse of his judgment. And that we are helpless to free ourselves from it.

We are in chains and there's no way out and so I think the law was given, if I'm to summarize it, the law was given to make us ready and hungry for Christ, says Paul.

And Christ is the one who is going to fulfill all of God's promises to Abraham for his people and for the world. So that's why Paul says in verse 4 that God sent his son to be born under the law and in verse 5 to redeem those who were under the law.

And I think it's worth pausing here for just a moment once again because it's easy for us just to glide over how magnificent this is. I mean, what other story in the world is this the way in which God relates to his creatures?

[16:38] In the 4th century, there was a wonderful Christian named Athanasius who was wrestling with this a little bit. He said, why did God have to save us this way? And he asked the question actually more specifically.

He said, why did God save humanity the exact same way that he created humanity? By simply speaking and by the power of the word, let it be, people are saved.

And he has a really interesting answer. He says, in creation, when God speaks, he's bringing something out of nothing. But in redemption, God is bringing something out of slavery.

He says, in creation, there is no one to resist God's power. There is literally nothing and he just speaks it into being. But in redemption, God comes to save those who are resisting his salvation. And so, in some sense, he says, the work of redemption actually requires a greater act of divine power, a greater act of divine creativity and intentionality than creation.

[17:41] And that's precisely why he came in the flesh, God incarnate. God's power enters into the helplessness of our human condition to free us from the inside.

The son enters into our slavery so that we might enter into his family or as Calvin put on, said it, he said, the son comes and puts the chains on himself and takes the chains off of us.

That's what he does ultimately in the cross. All right, I want to pause here for a moment. Let's do a little check-in. How y'all doing? You following me so far?

Are we all right? Okay. Let's keep drinking. If the incarnation and redemption were all Paul talked about, I would argue that would be enough glory for the human mind to contemplate for eternity. But Paul gives us more than that. He says that the goal of the incarnation and redemption is our adoption, verse 5, as sons. God's son became like us, note this, so that we might become like him in relationship to the father.

[19:00] And this, I think, is the deepest reason. I didn't say this earlier, but I think this is the deepest reason why Paul uses he keeps the gender-specific language here. This is for men and

women. This is for Jew and Greek. This is for slave and master.

But he wants to keep this language because he wants to draw the intimate connection between our experience of adopted sonship and Christ's experience of eternal and natural and glorious sonship with the father.

There's a connection between the two. Now, it's worth pausing here for a moment because I think there's a really important truth here that's actually the foundation of our experience of being adopted children of God.

And it's this. God does not become a father when we become his children. Think about that. God does not become a father when we become his children.

God is already eternally the father of the eternal son. And he only has one son, not four. Eternally. [20 : 05] And what this means is something actually just mind-boggling revolutionary. It means that his fatherhood is essential to who he is eternally is, not a late addition to who he is.

And it means that his fatherly heart is rock-solid. It's totally dependable. It's thoroughly unshakable. And when he sets his love upon us, his love cannot be shaken off.

When the father adopts us as his spiritual children, it's like a laser beam. He directs the intensity of his eternal love that he has for his son, and he directs it to us as well.

He draws us into the joy of this relationship with himself. He sends his son on a mission to share his son's experience of his father's love.

Does that make sense? And I think this is why Jesus prays at the beginning of his marvelous high priestly prayer the night before he is betrayed and crucified.

[21 : 12] In John chapter 17, he says, this is eternal life, that they, my disciples, may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent, knowing both together at the same time.

I think this is also what Jesus' invitation to rest is truly about in Matthew chapter 11. Notice, Matthew chapter 11, we love that verse, come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, come to me all who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.

But we often skip the verses that come right before it. Right before it, Jesus says, no one knows the son except the father, and no one knows the father except the son, and anyone to whom the son chooses to reveal the father.

So Jesus is talking about his unique relationship with the father that nobody else has except those to whom Jesus chooses to reveal it to. And then he says to them, come to me all who labor and have you laden, and I will give you rest.

I think the point is, is if you want true rest, you come to Jesus, and he's going to teach you about this relationship with the father. He's going to draw you into the goodness of his relationship with the father so that you experience the father's heart as Jesus experiences the father's heart.

[22 : 26] So these verses are just so astonishing. They cover the whole Bible, and they just go so darn deep, and they go so high up, and they show us that the whole Christian life is an adopted life.

Adopted into the family of God, and adopted into the life of God. And this brings us, finally, to our second point, because it's all about the role of the Holy Spirit in this.

We've been talking a lot about father and son. We need to get a little more Trinitarian. The Holy Spirit. So if the first point is God sent his son into our humanity so we can receive status of adoption.

And the second point is God sent his spirit into our hearts so that we can experience the privileges of adoption. This is verse 6.

And because you are sons, God has sent the spirit of his son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father. I think that might be the first time we hear the language Abba outside the Gospels.

[23 : 36] No, it's in Romans. That was wrong. Romans, Romans chapter 8, and then Galatians here. But it's one of the few places where we hear this language outside of Jesus speaking to the Father in the Gospels.

And what it tells us is that God is not content with simply assuming our humanity. He wants to dwell in our hearts. He is not content with just simply bringing us into his family.

He wants to fill us with his life and intimacy. So when we put our trust in Jesus, God fills us with his spirit. His Holy Spirit takes up residence in us, makes his home in us, guides us in his truth, assures us of his love, protects us in his peace.

But the Spirit's main goal is to teach us how to relate to God from the heart. To fill our hearts with affection for our new Father.

To make intimacy with God, communion with God, the heartbeat and the power plant of our lives. He says, crying out, Abba, Father.

[24 : 51] Father. So this is a really marvelous thing, friends. The goal of the incarnation is not just that God would rescue you from your sins and give you status as his children.

The goal of the incarnation is that you would be able to relate to God the same way that Jesus himself relates to God. In constant communion, ongoing conversation, joyful intimacy, intimacy. It's what Irenaeus in the second century called the two hands of God, the Son embracing our humanity and the Spirit enlivening our hearts.

So to summarize, Galatians 4 teaches us that Christianity is not a religion of slaves, it's a religion of sons and daughters. Salvation is pictured as adoption, a movement from slavery to sonship. And I just want to conclude by talking about a couple temptations for us that I think Paul's language of salvation, I mean, of sonship helps press against.

[26 : 01] And one is a temptation for us if we're living a kind of, if we're not yet Christians. I think it's easy for us to be convinced that a lot of, that various forms of what the Bible would call slavery are really various forms of freedom that are going to bring us fulfillment.

Did that make sense? That felt a little convoluted. Let me try to put this a different way. I think it's easy for us to be convinced that a lot of the freedoms that we pursue or the ways we seek to express our freedom that we think are going to bring true fulfillment to our identity and meet all of our longings and desires as humans, those things are often what the Bible calls forms of slavery that we actually need to be delivered from and brought into a true freedom as sons of God.

So, there's a number of things we could look at. We could just look at, like, medically, how we want the freedom to terminate life whenever we can. Or we can look at sexually, I want the freedom to give my body away to whomever I want.

Or we could even look at financially, I want the freedom to use my money for what I want and to make as much of it as I can. And we can go down a whole list of things that are really significant for us.

But I think one of the common things that we find is that the more and more we pursue certain things in our life that we think are going to bring us freedom, the more and more we actually discover we are in bondage.

[27 : 34] They're not actually meeting our desires. They're not actually meeting our longings. they're not actually bringing that stable sense of who we are created to be and who we are meant to belong to.

And so the further that we pursue, the further we realize, I'm actually not really free. And Paul, I think, wants to say to us, you are missing out on true freedom if you think that freedom is anything in life apart from faith in Jesus Christ.

And Paul says, come to Christ, believe in Christ, put on Christ, and experience the freedom of belonging to his family and being in intimacy with the one that he calls Father.

Christ has come to set you free from all false freedoms. I think there's a second temptation, and this is one that hits home a little more in-house in some ways, is that there is a temptation for Christians once delivered from some of their slaveries, and they realize they've been adopted as children of God to want to return to some forms of slavery.

And this is something that was significant in Galatia. The significant thing was eating at the table. Peter, Cephas, was discovering that I'm supposed to eat at the table with Gentiles, with Greeks, and were in the same family under God, and eventually he thought that wasn't such a good idea anymore.

[29 : 07] He shouldn't eat with Greeks. And Paul says to him, you're going back to a form of slavery where you think the Old Testament law is what binds you together and what saves you.

I'm reminding you that it is Christ himself. And there's a number of ways in which we can seek to go back to slavery. I remember walking with a bunch of young ecclesiastics when I was young adults about ten years ago.

And one of the slaveries that we often wrestled with was sexual slavery. Just slavery to pornography. And the constant temptation towards that in our culture and how it's so rampant. And one of the things we talked about is what does it look like to resist temptation in those places? And we developed this three-fold thing. It's called renounce, announce, and worship. So we'd say, we renounce, we renounce that temptation from, we renounce that temptation.

Then we'd say, we announce, I announce that I'm a child of God because I belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. And then we'd say, Lord Jesus Christ, I worship you. So it was this way of when we would get, when people would get tempted thoughts, they would right away be like, we renounce that, we announce who we truly are as children of God, we're not slaves anymore.

[30 : 28] And then we seek to worship the Lord. There are a bunch of other ways in which we supported each other. Another example is sometimes we can get caught up even in seeking to minister to the Lord and serve the Lord in our church, we can always feel like we need to do more and more and more in order to be acceptable to God.

God. So, one time I was, I had quite a busy schedule and David made an offhanded comment to me in my office, I don't think he even remembers that, he says, it sounds like you're trying to justify yourself.

And I had no clue what he was talking about. And then I thought about it and I was like, oh yeah, am I significant to you God because of what I do or because of what I've done?

or is it rather because you have made me your son? Am I turning even ministry into a form of slavery? Or is it just flowing out of the joy of being your son and wanting to see others experience that?

And there can also be a way in the church in which we just simply settle for too little. This is the final thing I kind of want to end on. As brothers and sisters, we can settle for too little as Christians.

[31 : 45] We can be satisfied with our adopted status. God has redeemed me. I belong to him. I'm his child without enjoying our adopted privileges. We can settle for knowing about his redemption without enjoying the sweetness of the communion that it gives us with the Father.

And this is precisely Paul's message to us this Christmas. You are sons. You are not slaves.

Remember what God has done for you. Remember who you are.

Do not return again to a yoke of slavery, but in particular enjoy calling him Abba, Father. That is the great privilege you have been given.

To cry out to him. Whether this is a season of joy and celebration and fun and festivity and friends and family, or whether this is a season of loss and grief and remembering the ones that we wish we were with and remembering the brokenness of our families, whatever it is, we have one who we can call Abba, Father.

We have one to whom we belong. We have one who has set his love on us from before the foundation of the world and whose love for us, just as his love for a son, cannot be shaken because he has adopted us and he has called us sons and daughters of God.

[33 : 08] Brothers and sisters, I speak these things to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.