

We Believe: For Us and Our Salvation

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I don't know if you've noticed, but Christmas is everywhere today, isn't it? I guess that has been the case since October in some ways. But today, Christmas Day, I hope we can see Christmas is everywhere, including, okay, in our Bibles. We are drawn, aren't we, every year irresistibly and rightly so, to the Christmas story itself in the Gospels, to Mary and Joseph, the angels, the shepherds, the wise men, the birth of the Lord Jesus. But once you see that at the heart of Christmas is the incarnation, God himself coming to be with us, while the Christmas lights start flashing from cover to cover in this book, all throughout the story God has told us.

And this morning, I want to take us to an unlikely part of the Bible, okay, on Christmas Day. We've been spending some time in Hebrews the last couple of Sundays as we take in the glory of the incarnation, Jesus Christ, truly God, truly man. And today, we read a part of Paul's letter to the Galatians, because at the heart of that passage is chapter 4, verses 4 and 5. This is a little bit like, I suppose, you may have done this morning, opening your Advent calendar on Christmas Day. If your Advent calendar goes up to Christmas Day, normally it's a kind of special surprise, a treat, isn't it?

On Christmas Day, we open our Bibles and find an extra special surprise in these verses, because in the middle of this letter, we find Paul celebrating that Jesus was, what? What is it? What does he say?

Twice he says it. Starts with a B. What was he? Born. Born. Brilliant. When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law. Okay, what this letter's been building up to in this part is a birthday party. God sent his Son to be born, Paul cries. Christ is born. Brilliant news.

And this morning, I just want us to see one final reason this year why it is so worth us celebrating the birth of Jesus. Earlier in our service, we read together the Nicene Creed. We confessed together this belief for us, and for our salvation. He came down from heaven. And that is why Jesus' birth and his birthday is such good, wonderful news for us today, friends. Whoever we are, just have a look at this verse 5. God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law. Why?

[3 : 0 8] To redeem. To redeem. To redeem those under the law. That we might receive adoption to sonship. Today, we celebrate that Christ was born for us and for our salvation. Praise God. And so, we're just going to take a look at three points briefly to help us take in that good news of Jesus coming. The first is that it was a perfect gift under ruthless wrapping. Now, I don't know if any of you has a ruthless wrapper in your life, or maybe you are the ruthless wrapper, okay, in your family. You get these impenetrable presents, don't you, that you can't get your fingers under. How do you get the gift out? I can't get into this thing. Well, Paul tells us that that is what God's gift was like before Jesus' birth. He promised his people his blessing. So, they knew what they were getting for Christmas, and they were a bit like children, I suppose, maybe like some of you were this morning, hopeful, waking up early, itching with excitement, impatient to get into the gift. But they had to wait.

But you promised, God, they said, you promised that we would have peace with you and righteousness from you and freedom before you. You promised your blessing. But God had wrapped up his blessing and put it under the tree for hundreds of years. It was waiting with their names on it. It was all theirs, but it wasn't time to open it yet. It was wrapped up so tightly, they could not get into it.

Why does Paul say that? Well, he says twice, two illustrations he gives us to show us God's people had to wait under the care of a legal guardian. So, see that spiritual reality there, chapter 3, verses 23 and 24. Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. So, the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. So, first illustration he gives us is that God's people were like prisoners, locked up. And the prison guard, if you like, was the law. So, God kept his people under custody. So, to speak detained up until what happened, verse 24, up until Christ came.

But before God gave them that inexpressible gift, they had to wait under a guardian. Or here's us getting closer, maybe to Christmas, Luke chapter 4, verses 1 and 2. He says, what I'm saying is that as long as an heir is underage, he is no different from a slave. Although he owns the whole estate, the heir is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So, second illustration, God's people, firstly, like prisoners, secondly, are like children in line to inherit all that the parents own. But before they come of age, until the right time, well, they don't have possession of any of it yet. It doesn't fully belong to them, but their name is on it. Instead, they have to wait, wait under the care of guardians. So, do we see what he is saying? Before the time came for the blessing that God had promised, the great gift, his people had a long, hard, grueling wait under a ruthless guardian. And that guardian was God's law. They were like children being promised the ultimate gift from God at Christmas, but they had to wait for Christmas Day to unwrap it, to take possession of it. And so, the perfect gift, his blessing in Christ was ruthlessly wrapped. Some of you might have seen, I guess, the Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. I'm sure it's going to be on today. I'm sure you can catch it. And as I thought of God's people under the law,

I thought it's a bit like Narnia under the reign of the Ice Queen. What was it like for the Narnians, remember? There's always winter, but never Christmas. They had the dark days, the freezing wind, the slippery pavements, but not the gift. No light, no life, no freedom, nothing to celebrate, only the long, hard, heavy winter, but no Christmas. That was what living under the law was like for centuries of God's people. Or think of the other classic, the panto. I doubt many of you have seen a panto this year. Maybe you have, but how does it always start with the ruthless stepmother or stepfather who puts the children to work like a slave? Well, that was life under the law for God's people. The law said, do this and you will live. Do it right. Do it perfectly. Do it well.

[8 : 48] Be good. Follow the rules. Then you will be blessed. God will only come and give you the gift gift if you're really good. Does that remind you of anyone? Be good. Obey and you'll get on the nice list. Fail and you'll be on the naughty list. Because only if you are good enough will God come and give you the present that he has promised you. That is how God's people lived before Christ came.

As long as an heir is underage, says Paul, he's no different from a slave. Worked to the bone, even though he owns the whole estate. Their name was on the gift, but the ruthless guardian said they have to work for it. There's a series of books I love. I used to get these books for Christmas. I don't know if you've read any series of unfortunate events. It's now a film, a Netflix series too. Maybe you can see it later on. And in it, three children, the Baudelaire's, orphaned at the beginning of the story, but their parents have left them just an incalculable fortune. But the whole series of unfortunate events that follows flows out of this simple fact that they have this vast inheritance, but they cannot get into it. Okay, they are waiting to come of age. It is waiting in their name until one of them turns 18. And while they wait, they're sent to live with various legal guardians, but their so-called guardians, they're either trying to steal the inheritance, or they neglect the children, or they put them to work. And so they live very, very poorly. And you wouldn't think, looking at them, that they were the children of wealthy, loving parents, or heirs to a vast fortune. And so they are heirs, waiting, but treated no differently than slaves, even though they own the whole inheritance. It was a ruthless weight for them to come of age. And friends, that is what it was like for God's people under the law, waiting, waiting, waiting for Christ to come. In that same sense, no matter how hard they worked or tried, God's people could not get into the perfect gift because the set time had not yet come. It was ruthlessly wrapped. So when then could they open it? Well, you know the answer, don't you? Christmas Day. Christmas Day. This is coming to our second point, because God's gift comes to us through a perfect son to redeem sinners. The wait is over. Okay, now we've tasted the suspense, if you like, of the advent calendar. We've opened up all the flaps. We could finally open up chapter 4, verses 4 and 5. But when the set time had fully come,

God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. At last, finally the gift is given, sent from God, born of a woman, the coming of Christ. They were waiting, weren't they? Waiting, waiting, waiting to come of age.

But friends, when did we come into our inheritance as the children of God? When do we think the church came of age? When was our 18th birthday, so to speak?

Well, we know, don't we? When did the old give way to the new? Our Bibles tell us, don't they? When does the old give way to the new? With these words. This is the genealogy of Jesus Christ.

[12 : 54] The birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. The church, we came of age, we came into our inheritance the day that Jesus was born. His birthday, God's people began to unwrap the gift, to receive the inheritance, to get out from under the heavy hand of the law, to leave the house of the guardian and instead live freely as children of the living God. It was Jesus' birthday that opened up God's promised blessing for a weary, waiting people. And all the people in the Old Testament, the pages and pages of the Old Testament, how many people, millions of people, hundreds of years, waited and did not get their present from God. For them, it was always winter and never Christmas.

This was the day they couldn't wait for. Us gathered here. This is what they longed for. The time God had set from before the beginning of the world for his son to be born. And so these verses zoom in, don't they, on his birthday, because they tell us how his birth opens up God's blessing for us. He was born under the law to redeem those who were under the law. I wonder, maybe someone's asked you if you got to choose any time or place in history that you could go and live. When and where would you live? I've sometimes thought I'd love to live during the Scottish Reformation. But then I think, you know, if somebody seriously offered me, when would I like to live and where? I think I would still choose now.

There's been no kind of time in history, has there, that's offered so much freedom, not to mention health and hygiene. We thought, didn't we, about how ruthless life was under the law for God's people before he came. It was, says Paul, to all intents and purposes like slavery. And so given that choice to be born at any time, in any place, isn't it incredible to think that Jesus chose to be born under the law. He chose to be born a slave to God's perfect standard. He bound himself not to break any of the rules, but to keep the law perfectly in every detail. The first weeks of his life show that in really stark detail. Luke tells us in his gospel shortly after Jesus was born that at the time set by the law of the Lord, Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple to keep the law of the Lord, to offer a sacrifice according to the law of the Lord, to do everything for him that the law of the Lord required. And only when they had done everything set by the law of the Lord did they then go home. Five times Luke tells us that

Jesus had to do everything according to the law of the Lord, because Jesus was born under the law. To keep it from his birth fully, perfectly, as no one had ever done or has done since.

So the law made slaves of God's children, not only because it demanded the impossible, from people incapable of obeying because of sin. So that in effect they lived on a constant treadmill that they couldn't keep up with, that they were constantly being thrown off of.

[16 : 40] So not only could they not keep up with the demands, but there was no way back for them when they did fall off, when they fell behind. They were always running and never catching up.

It's possible, isn't it, for us still to live in that way now? In fact, we are hardwired to live in that way. Even if we don't know God's law personally in his Bible, Paul says this is simply how we work, how the world works. We were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces, the basic principles, he says, of the world. Isn't this the promise behind every religion, every lifestyle in the world?

Live up to this ideal, this vision. Work hard and you'll get there. Obtain this status, this worth, and don't stop until you are there, you have perfected it. But we know, don't we, we will never reach it.

It's like chasing the horizon. The closer we get, the further it moves away. And perhaps you are on that treadmill of works today. Well, the good news of Christmas is that Jesus came and was born to take you off that treadmill and to run in that place for you. He chose to take our place under the law's demands, to run perfectly where we have fallen. He did not come to be our coach to help us run the race better, nor does he need our help to run it perfectly.

Though it's a straight swap, he takes us off that treadmill of works and he steps onto it for us. He was born under the law to redeem those under the law. He was most free, but in love he came to take the chains off our hands and put them on his own. He became a slave for us to free us that we might never be again. And so on Christmas Day, friends, we need to know that we can be saved from our guilt and our failings and our spiritual slavery only because Jesus was born a slave for us under the law. He came and kept the whole of God's perfect law so that he could clothe us in his own perfect life. And the law condemned him to death on a cross so that he could take away and pay for all our sin, all of our failings, so that if your faith is in Christ today, God does not see your failing, your sin, only the perfect and pure righteousness of his own son shining back at him. And so God can declare you today right with him, righteous in Christ, not for what we do or have done, but for all that Christ has done for us.

[20 : 03] And so today, of all days, if you have not yet put your trust in Christ and his finished work to free you from that life, your works, your sins, your guilt, would you? Would you today receive the gift of God's son promised through long ages and now given for you, a blessing of peace with him and righteousness from him and freedom before him? Jesus opens God's gift to us by taking our place under the law so that simply by putting our trust in him, we would be set free from that ruthless guardian to inherit God's promised blessing. Which brings us to our final point this morning, which is a perfect God who adopts sons. Those stories I mentioned, a series of unfortunate events. I said the problem was that everybody just wants to get their hands on the inheritance. How do they get into it?

But of course, for the children, the main thing they want most of all is not the money, of course. What do they want most of all? Well, most of all, they want to be children again, of loving parents, to have their family back, to be children in a family again, no longer slaves of whichever guardian that they are living under. And that is ultimately what Jesus was born to give us, not only the gift of an incalculable inheritance, not only to set us free from slavery, but that we would be children of the living God. We have a look at verses four and five again.

God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Why sons rather than daughters or children?

Well, because back then, it was only sons he inherited in the will. So he's saying that we in Christ have the status of sons, that we are both children and heirs of God. Chapter three, verse 28 makes clear if we're not sure that men and women are both equally and fully included in that.

He said, hasn't he, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave or free, not male and female. You are all one in Christ Jesus. And so we can say with Paul, whoever we are, that the son of God became a slave, so that we who were slaves might become the sons of God. Let's see that God sent his son into the world, verse four, so he could send the spirit of his son into our hearts, verse six. The spirit who calls out in us what? Abba, Father. Friends, Christmas tells us that we have, through faith in Christ, God as our father, through his son, by his spirit. We celebrate the birth of a child who came to make us children of the living God, to give us peace and rightness and freedom with him.

[23 : 35] What kind of freedom did the children have on Christmas Day? Some of you maybe have seen this this morning. I don't know what time your alarm went off, I don't know what time they were up.

Caleb always gets up at the same time in our house, nothing changed. But there they are, okay, at crazy o'clock, aren't they? Leaping on the bed, stripping, wrapping off the presents, just pure excitement and thrill and joy. There's no shame, is there, in children on Christmas Day. There's no guilt in them. There's no holding back in the presence of those who love them. Well, friends, that is the gift that God gave us at Christmas, that we, we should have that shameless freedom with him, that guiltless joy, not to hold back in his presence, but to cry out to him as our father. Caleb's first word was da-da-da-da-da, and I can take no credit for that. That's just the easiest word, I think. But back then, the first word would have been ab-ba-ba-ba, okay, the word for daddy, daddy. And that is what Paul says God puts in our hearts through faith in Christ by his spirit, that cry of a baby for a father who loves him, who loves her. And that effortless way that children spend time with and depend on and receive from their parents on Christmas Day. That is God's gift to me and ye, that we should have that kind of relationship with him through his son. See, his gift to us ultimately, his promised blessing, what is it? Well, it is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the gift of himself, the living, the triune God for our salvation. I don't know if you'll get any great gifts for Christmas today, but whoever you are, here is one not to miss. This great gift given to you by your loving Heavenly Father.

There's a scene in Pilgrim's Progress, okay, where the travelers go to somebody's house, the interpreter's house, and the interpreter takes them into a room where there's a man, and in his hand, the man holds a rake, and the floor is covered in dust and bits of dirt and fluff and straw, and the man spends his days, okay, raking these bits of fluff and dirt and straw around and sorting through it, okay, he never looks up, he just sits down on the ground. But next to him, somebody is holding a celestial crown above his head, and each day, this person offers him the celestial crown in exchange for his rake, an endless inheritance in exchange for his raking around in the dust and the dirt of the floor. But the man never, ever looks up to see the crown that is above his head. He doesn't know it's there for him to have. He spends his days just working down on the ground in the emptiness of the world, life as it is. Well, that's really a picture of somebody who doesn't yet know God, but it could well be a picture, couldn't it, of us who do know him today. Searching maybe for the blessing, the peace, the righteousness, the freedom that we long for in the stuff of this world, in the stuff of this day, this week, instead of knowing the blessing of relationship with the eternal triune God. This celestial crown is held out to us today in Christ. A preacher, Sinclair Ferguson, preaches in the city. I heard him first tell that story from Pilgrim's Progress. He put it this way, that we are so prone, even as Christians, to live, he said, below the level of our privileges. How often do we find ourselves raking around in the dust and the dirt rather than to receive the celestial crown from our Father? But brothers and sisters, if we know today what it is that we have waited for, what we have longed for, what we have been set free from, and what we have been given instead, why would we not grasp that crown above our heads today and rejoice in God our Savior? For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Is that not the greatest gift that any of us could receive today or any day? The Christmas gift that God gave in sending his Son and giving his Holy Spirit. Let's thank him together for that gift just now. Let's pray. Gracious God and loving Heavenly Father, how we thank you for the great gift of love that you sent in your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Father, how we thank you that you have opened up through him the way to you, that we might come to you as your children and receive your great blessing.

Father, how we pray that those of us who know you today and whose trust is in Christ would know the freedom that we have with you, would know the joy that it is to be with you, the peace that comes from you, that we would know that we are right with you and clothed in the righteousness of Christ, that our sins have been paid for and taken away as far as the east is from the west.

Help us, we pray, to cry out to you as our Father. And our Father, we pray for those who as yet do not know you and whose trust is not in Christ, that by your Spirit you have put in their hearts to cry out to you as Father today and to know the great blessing, the great gift that is Jesus Christ, given and sent and born for them, that they might be saved and be with you eternally.

[30 : 26] This we pray and ask in Jesus' name. Amen.