

Merry Christmas! If you thought Christmas was over, then your Christmas is too small. At least as early as the sixth century, our fathers in the faith noticed that there was so much to celebrate between the feast of the Nativity on December 25<sup>th</sup> and the celebration of Epiphany on January 5<sup>th</sup> that there was no room for any fasting. As time went on, this twelve day period became the Christmas season, a time for worship, feasting, carols, and gifts, the biggest celebration on the whole Christian calendar except for the fifty day celebration of the Resurrection.

Marking time according to the church calendar is an effort to evangelize time. The Church is trying to fill history with the gospel. When we observe and celebrate these events, we are telling the story of Jesus as good news that transforms the world and everything in it, and fighting against the idea that Jesus is only Lord between our ears or in our hearts. No, let heaven and nature sing, for He comes to make His blessings known far as the curse is found!

For many people, the passing of time is a curse, an inevitable cycle of futility leading only to death. We want to stop time, or turn back time, or go back in time, because time is our enemy, dragging us down through decay, closer and closer to death. Do people in our culture work hard and spend ridiculous amounts of money to stay young, or at least look young? Time is their enemy. (Paul mentions this slavery a bit later in this chapter in vv. 9-10).

But Christians see time differently, because in the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, in fulfillment of God's ancient promise to Eve that the seed of the woman would win the victory over the serpent who brought the world crashing down to death back in the garden. Time doesn't bring death. Sin brings death, and death tried to take time captive to do his dark work.

But time is God's servant, and so ultimately, Satan's attempt to enslave time failed. Time didn't just bring death. Time brought forth a Savior. Or, more properly, when God's servant time had done what God asked it to do, God sent forth His Son, and that's what we celebrate at Christmas, and that's why Christians use time to tell the gospel story. God sent forth His Son to redeem time from its captivity to death. Time now brings us closer and closer to eternal life with God.

In the fullness of time, Galatians tells us, God sent forth His Son to turn slaves into sons, and to redeem us from the elementary principles of the world, and from slave-like conditions of the law. Christmas is all about sonship, becoming heirs of God. The incarnation is why we say "Merry Christmas" to one another, but it's also why we can say "Abba! Father!" to God.

God created us to call Him our Father, which is why Adam is spoken of as the son of God in Luke 3:38. But through sin we became sons of a different father, the devil, as Jesus says in John 8:44. God's desire was that we call Him Father, but we can only do that through the Spirit of Sonship. It is that Spirit within our hearts that cries out "Abba." But since we devil-sons, we could not receive that Spirit, and couldn't walk by the Spirit. We had to be ruled by laws and commandments, treated as slaves and watched by guardians and managers. Before the fullness of time came we didn't just walk up to God and call Him Father; we approached middle management and asked them to talk to God for us. Only a rare few members of the Old Covenant had the Spirit of sonship.

We needed to be adopted. We needed God to act to designate us as His heirs, because we couldn't presume on His riches because of our sin. We belonged to God in the sense that He made us and we owed everything to Him, but we related to Him not as sons, but as enemies, or at best slaves. The only way for slaves to become heirs is by adoption, not by any right that they could claim. God had to be the one to act, to make us sons.

But sin stood in the way. We had another father, the devil, and by sinning, we had given him a claim on our lives. Before God could adopt us, He needed to redeem us, to buy us back from our violent, abusive father who was storing up an inheritance of suffering and death for us. Satan enforced his claim on all of Adam's sons, on all those who sinned against the law like Adam, whether the revealed law or the eternal law written on our hearts. Everyone born of woman, everyone under the law belonged to death, because of the curse of sin. (That's what Paul was talking about back in Gal. 3:10-15).

As you can see, I'm just working backwards up the ladder in vv. 4-6: In order to cry "Abba", we need the Spirit; in order to receive the Spirit, we need to be sons; in order to be sons, we need to be adopted; before we can be adopted, we need to be redeemed; and in order to be redeemed, we needed God to send forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law. And before God did that, He was waiting for the fullness of time to come. He had set a date and appointed a time, prophesied and promised all over the Old Testament, and the whole world waited for the promised to come true and the prophecies to be fulfilled.

And then one day, the fullness of time came, and an angel came, and spoke to a woman named Mary, and told her that she would give birth to a son, but that this son would be different than all other sons born to woman. This Son would be the son of the Most High. The Spirit would overshadow her, the Spirit of Sonship, and the child she conceived would be called *holy* – the Son of God.

Christmas is about sonship – the Son of God coming to make many sons for God. The whole chain of blessings in vv. 4-6 was set in motion by God’s missionary work of sending forth His Son to redeem us and adopt us, so that He could send His Spirit into our hearts to cry “Abba! Father!”

That’s what Christmas is all about. Our passage today doesn’t tell us *how* He redeemed us, although we see a bit of that in Paul’s opening greeting in chapter 1:3-5: “Grace to you and peace from God *our Father* and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God *and Father*, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Christmas was a rescue mission, to deliver us *from* the present evil age *into* the fullness of time, from the age of slavery into the time of sonship. Jesus accomplished that redemption by giving Himself for our sins, and that giving *finished* on the cross, but it *started* when He took on our flesh and placed Himself under the law for us, so that He could be our redeemer and make our adoption possible.

That’s the heart of the message today: Christ redeemed us by giving Himself for us and to us, in order to make us sons and heirs of God. When we are united to Him by faith, we receive the gift of adoption, and God sends the Spirit of His Son into our hearts. So how do we receive this gift rightly?

I have a four-part answer to that question, and I’m going to state it for you, and then unpack it. God sent forth His Son, and we receive Him rightly 1) by faith, not by works; 2) by refusing to turn back; 3) as sons, not slaves; 4) giving God the glory. If you said, hmm, that just sounds like a summary of Galatians, well, you’d probably be right. Galatians tells you how to unwrap and use your Christmas present!

When I say “by faith, not by works”, that’s simply an implication of verse 4: God sent forth His Son. You are redeemed by something God did, not something you did. Galatians 3 fills out the rest. The idea is not that if you log enough hours on the good works treadmill now, you get to rest on heaven’s couch later. The idea is that you start out on your knees in thanks, and God raises you up to walk by faith.

“No turning back” means no longer living like a slave. Stop thinking that life is just one thing after another that leads to death! Stop trying to turn back time! Stop worrying and being anxious about tomorrow! Stop obeying your sinful desires and start enjoying your inheritance. Galatians 5:16-26 tells you more about that.

“As sons, not slaves” – to do this, you need to conform your mindset to this reality: You are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir. Think of God as a loving Father, not as a slavemaster. Go to Him boldly and freely, not in servile fear. To modify an analogy from a wise pastor, if someone hired you to work on their house, you wouldn’t just walk into their kitchen and start fixing a sandwich, or sit down at their dinner table. You wouldn’t barge in at 3am and ask for your paycheck. Masters and employers expect you to know your place, and to be bound by the clock and business hours. But fathers don’t! Because you’ve been adopted into the family, you belong, and God wants you to act like you belong. Approach God with Fatherly honor, yes, but also with the freedom of a son.

Finally, receive the gift that the Father sent by giving God the glory. Don’t think that only means with songs and prayer. It definitely means those things, and your Christmas season should be full of them, but it also means joyful feasting, celebrating, resting, and laughing under the smile of your Father, to whom be the glory, as it says in Galatians 1:5. When our fathers in the faith considered the world-changing significance of God sending forth His Son, they decided that one day was far too little time to devote to glorifying God for the incarnation. So keep your hearts merry for another week!

God sent Jesus to you in the fullness of time, to redeem you and make you His sons. Celebrate the sending of Jesus by faith, without turning back, as sons, not slaves, giving all the glory to God forevermore.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*