

GALATIANS 4:4  
December 24, 2022  
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Galatians 4.

I'd be willing to bet that most of you seen "A Charlie Brown Christmas." It's certainly a family favorite for us.. The whole plot, of course, revolves around Charlie Brown, who is experiencing an existential crisis as he desperately searches for some semblance of meaning in Christmas. And the climax of the story is when Charlie Brown, as crestfallen and disillusioned as ever, exclaims, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?"

And his faithful friend Linus calmly says, "Sure, Charlie Brown. I can tell you what Christmas is all about." And he goes on to quote from Luke 2 and the angelic announcement of the birth of Christ to the shepherds. It's a uniquely powerful moment. It was even controversial when it was released in 1965. The network thought Linus's answer was "too religious" for their audience. It was Charles Schultz himself that insisted that Linus be allowed to quote from the Bible.

Charlie Brown's question is one that reverberates through the years: "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?"

There are lots of ways people answer that question. It's about giving. It's about family. It's about love. It's about joy. Or peace. Or hope. Or belief—all the abstract notions that adorn our Christmas cards, but are left undefined. It seems to me that much of what is celebrated at Christmas is long on sentimentality, but short on substance. "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?"

We still find the answer to that question, just as Linus did, in the Bible. And what we find is that Christmas isn't ultimately about a feeling we have inside, or about something we do with or for other people. It's not about what we do, but about something that God did.

While we aren't looking at the passage that Linus quoted this evening, we are going to consider another passage that he might just as well have quoted. Just one verse, Galatians 4:4: "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."

If you're you like structure, I'll give you my outline.

- 1) *What God Did*
- 2) *When God Did It*
- 3) *How God Did It*
- 4) *Why God Did It.*

## I. WHAT GOD DID

First, then, *what God did*. The main statement in Galatians 4:4, the thing that everything else in the verse expands on and explains is simply this: "God sent his Son." This, friends, is *the most basic truth about Christmas*.

Take note here of *who* it is that was sent. The child in the manger is none other than God the Son become a man.

That is, Jesus is not merely God's representative. He is not merely God's servant, a human being chosen and appointed by God. In the Bible, the title Son of God does not mean someone different from God, but one who share God's very nature. This child is truly *God himself*. "True God of true God / light from light eternal." He *emptied himself* into human nature, so that in him, the *fullness* of deity might dwell in bodily form.

You see, if Jesus were merely a man, the celebration of Christmas would make little sense. After all, billions and billions of children have been born throughout history, but only one whose birthday is been celebrated annually around the world and has been for 2000 years. And though Jesus is surely a significant figure, if he is but a man, then he really is no different than any other philosopher or religious leader. Why would an international, multi-millennial holiday be set aside for him?

But of course, Jesus is no mere man who grew up to theorize and philosophize with words about God. No, he himself *is the Word of God*, the Word who "became flesh and dwelt among us."

Notice also that Paul says that the Son *was sent*. That would be an odd way to speak about the birth of a child under normal circumstances. I have three kids, and at one point each of them was born — each of them *came* into the world. But it would be a bit strange for me to say that they were *sent* into the world.

"Sending" implies that the one who sent existed beforehand. Jesus was not merely conceived, not merely born, he didn't merely come or arrive—he was *sent*. Christ's conception and birth was his entrance into our world as a human being, but not his entrance into *existence*.

We all, at one time, did not exist, and then, at a moment in time, we, body and soul began to exist, starting as a single cell in our mother's womb. But not so with God's Son. For as long as there has been a Father, there has been a Son. There was never a time when he did not exist, never a time when he was not co-equal and co-eternal with the Father and the Spirit in deity, glory, power, and majesty.

It was this one, the Eternal Son of God, who came to us at Christmas. "God sent his Son."

## II. WHEN GOD DID IT

*Second, when did God do it?* In one respect the answer is simple: at Christmas, of course! But this question is not really about the time of year that he came. It's not a question of the *solar calendar*.

Nor is it really a question of the *historical calendar*. Yes, it is true that Jesus came at a particular moment in history—a moment that is carefully defined for us by Luke when he tells us that all this happened during the census ordered by the Roman Emperor Augustus,—while Quirinius was governor of Syria,—while Herod was reigning over Judea. We can mark with great accuracy when it is in history that Jesus was born. And this is not unimportant. But it's not the time that Paul is concerned to tell us about here.

More than the solar calendar, or the historical calendar, Paul tells us about *the divine calendar*: “when *the set time* had fully come”—or literally, “in the fullness of time”—“God sent his Son.” That is, God sent his Son at the precise moment that he had sovereignly determined from before the world began.

Think of it like this. It's as if, from the dawn of creation, time began to run like sand in a hourglass—the number of grains calculated and determined by God according to his divine wisdom and purpose, moving toward a culmination. When the last grain dropped, the bottom of the hourglass was filled. The fullness of time, or what the book of Hebrews calls “the culmination of the ages,” the point that all history had been moving toward had come. God sent his Son.

We might wonder why it was that God set this particular time. Why didn't he send his Son sooner? For thousands of years, since the fall of Adam and Eve humanity had been plunged into corruption, condemnation, alienation from God. This insurmountable chasm of sin had broken open between God and humanity as we plunged ourselves deeper and deeper into darkness and death. But God did not send his Son immediately. He waited for hundreds, thousands of years. Was he late? Is that what Wesley meant when he wrote “Late in time, behold him come”?

Or was he too early? If he had come in our day, when everyone carries a camera around in their pocket and global communication is instantaneous, can you imagine his reach? His miracles would have gone viral. His teaching would be live streamed on the internet, heard by billions at the same time. Wouldn't that have been a better marketing strategy than an overlooked birth, a backwater childhood, an itinerant ministry, with no one but twelve sometimes unreliable students to carry on his legacy?

But like, we learn from that great Christmas movie, “The Fellowship of the Ring”: “A wizard is never late. Nor is he ever early. He arrives *precisely* when he means to.” And so it is with God's Son.

While God does not tell us “why,” he sent his Son at this particular moment in time, he *does* tell us that the timing was no mistake. He was not late in sending his Son. Nor was he early. He arrived precisely when he was meant to—as determined by God in his infinite and eternal wisdom.

And friends, as we remember tonight his first advent, our minds are drawn to his second advent. When God sent his Son, the divine hourglass flipped, and now all history is moving towards the second point when the time set by the Father's authority will be fulfilled, and Christ will come again. For just as God set a day when he would send his Son in humility to do away with sin by sacrificing himself, so too has God set a day on which he will send his Son in glory to judge the living and the dead and to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. He is not late, nor will he be early. He will come *precisely* when he means to.

### III. HOW GOD DID IT

What God did, when God did it, and third: *How did God do it?* How did God send his Son?

He did not send him as you might expect, and certainly not at those who were waiting for him at the time expected. God's Savior-King did not come astride a white charger, trumpets blaring, banners waving, armies arrayed behind him, knees bowing to him in allegiance and submission, evil and sin fleeing before his incontestably glorious might. He certainly *could* have. And take heart, because the Bible tells us that when he comes again, it will indeed be with just such triumphant exaltation.

But not so his first coming. No, in his first coming, God sent his son to be *born*. He came not in *glory*—though it is his due—but in *humility*. He came not as an invincible, kingly warrior, but a mortal, vulnerable child. He came not with fanfare and acclaim, but in still silence, unbeknownst to almost everyone in the world, save a few faithful Jews, a few shepherds from the hills of Judea, and a few particularly observant magi from the East.

God sent his Son to be born. And Paul describes this birth in two ways.

First, Paul says, he was “born of a woman.” This is another way of highlighting his full and true humanity. Jesus was not like Clark Kent, one who only *appeared* to be human but in fact was a superhuman alien. No, without ceasing to be what he was, he became what he was not. God the Son, without ceasing to be God, became a man.

Second, Paul says, he was “born under the Law.” That is, in humbling himself and taking on humanity, he likewise subjected himself to demands and requirements of God's Law. He wasn't above the Law. He didn't get a free pass. He didn't test out of obedience to the Law. He didn't have AP credits he could apply. In taking on our nature he also took on our obligation to obey what God requires, an obligation that no other human being has ever or could ever fully meet. He was born under the Law, that he might obey and fulfill it.

He who was the Creator, took on the nature of a creature. He who was the author of life, took upon himself the life that he had authored. He who established the Law, placed himself under its dictates.

Profound humility—but *why?*

#### IV. WHY GOD DID IT

Why did God do it? *Why did God send his Son, and in this way?* This gets to the crux of Charlie Brown's question: "What is Christmas all about?"

"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.*" The central reason God sent his Son was *to redeem.*

God is our Creator and Lord. He has authority to determine what is right and what is wrong, and he gives us his Law as a loving, wise boundary for us that in our lives we might thrive and flourish according to his design. We, as his creatures, are under his Law, accountable to him and the moral boundaries he has set for our good. But beginning with our first parents and on through today, we all ignore those boundaries, breaks those commands, and spurn God's rule in our lives.

And that means that now, for us, being under the Law means being *under a curse*—the curse of God's righteous condemnation for our sin and rebellion. And to be rescued from that condition, enslaved to sin and under the curse of God's judgment, we need a Redeemer.

And that is precisely what God has sent us in his Son.

But how does this child in the manger *redeem those under the Law*? And this is where it is important that while we celebrate the birth of Christ, we don't leave him in the manger. His birth is only the first act.

Ultimately, Christmas is the prelude to story that finds its climax in Good Friday and Easter. Earlier in Galatians we read this: "Christ redeemed us for the curse of the Law *by becoming a curse for us*, as it is written, 'cursed is everyone who is *hung on a tree.*'"

Christ redeems us by bearing the curse due to us, the penalty for our sins, in his death on the cross. Indeed, it is the only way in which sinful men and women could be redeemed. And it was for this very purpose that Christ was born. If, as Paul says, God sent his Son *to redeem those under the Law*, it means God sent his Son for the express purpose of dying in the place of sinners.

The manger is but the preparation for the cross. The Immortal God poured himself into a mortal frame, and humbled himself to the point of death. The Righteous One died for unrighteous sinners, that by his blood he might purchase us out of slavery to sin and its consequences, to be people for God's own possession.

Christmas, then, is but the first step of Christ's work of redemption. It was when God the Son, who whose body would be broken on the cross, took on a human nature *with a body that could be broken for us*. It was when God the Son, who would redeem us by shedding of his blood, took on human nature *with blood that could be shed for us*.

The road from Bethlehem ultimately leads up to Jerusalem, to a cross, and to an empty tomb, where Christ would indeed redeem from the curse of the Law all those who entrust themselves to him.

But Christ does more than redeem us. Paul goes on to say that “God sent his Son...to redeem those under the law, that *we might receive adoption to sonship.*”

Left to ourselves we are spiritually dead and alienated from God. But redeemed, we are more than just purchased out of sin for God possession, we are purchased to be in God’s family. Adopted by God, we inherit righteousness and eternal life.

Simply put: God the Son became a son of man so that *we might become sons of God.* God the Son was born of a woman so that *we might be born of God.* God the Son was born under the law so that *we might be redeemed from the curse of the Law.* God the Son was born to die so that *we might be born again to everlasting life.*

As Charles Wesley so brilliantly wrote in that carol we sang earlier:

*Mild he lays his glory by,  
born that man no more may die,  
born to raise the sons of earth,  
born to give them second birth.*

That’s what Christmas is about.

And that message of the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us, who died in the place of sinners and rose again in victory—that message, the Bible says, is good news “to those who receive him, those who believe in his name.” It is they who are given “the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.” (John 1:12–13).

Friends, Christ himself is God’s gift, freely offered to you to be your Redeemer and Lord, if you will receive him. And so tonight, this very moment, I invite you to receive Christ, to believe in his name, trusting in him alone to redeem you and give you everlasting life. And if you will receive him, not only as the child in the manger, but also as the crucified, risen, ascended, and exalted Lord and Redeemer, then you will be born again and become children of God as a free gift of his grace.

If that is already you tonight, then brothers and sisters, let us take care that in the sentimentality and tradition of this season, that we do not displace the what Christmas is really all about: God sent his Son to redeem us from the curse of the Law that we might be adopted into God’s family.

Which is just another way of saying that Christmas is about *the gospel of the grace of God.*