

## Introduction

Jesus is the reason for the season. That is a catchy phrase and an accurate one. Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus. Our text addresses what is the reason for Jesus. Why did he come?

We know the answer: to save us from sin. That is correct, but there is more to the story. Our text takes us to the consideration of identity. Has that been a question for you? This is not a question of the different roles you play in life, being a parent or a student. It is not about lifestyle, being married or single. It is not about gender identity or racial identity. Remove all of the labels. Who, at the core of what matters most, are you? The reason for the season ultimately answers that question. And in answering the question of identity, it also answers the question of where, or to whom, we belong.

## Text

The letter to the Galatians addresses a specific issue in that church. Paul had preached the gospel of faith to the Gentiles, and they had gladly received it. A church was then established. Paul left, and other teachers followed him preaching a different gospel. It went something like this:

It is nice that Jesus the Messiah is offered to nonJews, those who are not of God's covenant people. But if you are going to really be favored by God; if you are going to belong to his people, you need to follow the law of Moses, including for men being circumcised. Faith is fine, as far as that goes; but you can't really say that you belong to God if you do not come under his covenant law. It is the law that identifies you as belonging to God.

Paul lambasts this thinking. The law has no place in our salvation, no place in attaining favor with God or making us his. What then did the law do? Our text addresses that question.

*Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. (3:23)*

Think of it this way. Sin came into the world. Sin became rampant in the world. How then could sin be restrained? That's where the law came in. It identified what was wrong to do, and it punished law-breakers. That is what law does everywhere. The law tells me that I may not take my neighbor's car. If I do take my neighbor's car, the law punishes me. Therefore, I do not take my neighbor's car, so that I will not be punished. The law of Moses worked that way for the Jewish people, and the laws of all civilizations worked similarly. Indeed, even without civil laws, we have within our own consciences an inner law working the same way. We know it is not right to lie about our neighbor, and if we break that law, we feel guilty, punishing ourselves with our thoughts and maybe some kind of action. Thus, law is like a prison-guard, keeping us behind bars, so to speak, so that we cannot do whatever we want.

Our text then takes us to another imagery.

*<sup>24</sup> So then, the law was our guardian...*

Guardian sounds like a prison guard, but the Greek word (pedagogue) refers to a different image. A pedagogue was a slave who was responsible for the raising of a free man's son. From age 6 to adolescence, the slave was the son's guardian, making sure that he went to school, that he did not run astray.

You see the similar thought. The slave was responsible that the son grew up knowing his responsibilities in life. The slave had disciplinary power over the son to keep him in line. The son had to obey the slave. So, though the son was master, he could not exercise his privilege of master until he came of age and was legally granted his full freedom and authority. Paul develops this thought further in chapter 4:1–2.

*I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, <sup>2</sup> but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father.*

Paul, then, explains that this was the purpose of the law. For a time period, it served as prison guard or guardian to keep sin in check until the time that God had appointed for freedom.

*<sup>3</sup> In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.*

When would the time of taking possession of our rights and privileges come? It came; it came when Christ came. Go back to 3:24–26.

*<sup>24</sup> So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.<sup>25</sup> But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, <sup>26</sup> for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.*

So, to summarize, before Christ came, we were under guardianship by the law, in order that sin would be somewhat restrained in us. We were heirs of riches, but we could not access those riches. Salvation was still by faith, but it was a faith in a Savior still to come. That Savior came. We now enter into full privileges that had been held in trust for us. The law is no longer our guardian. We are free from the law, in the sense that we now belong fully to Christ. Christ, then, came to give us our full inheritance rights and privileges.

But then, that is not the full story. For it gives the impression that Christ came to give us what was owed us. We were sons of God waiting to come of age and get what was ours.

Let me stop for a moment and explain why I am using the term “sons” to apply to both men and women. In that age and culture, sons, not daughters, received inheritance from the fathers. So, in the context of discussing inheritance, Paul is making clear that even women are as sons receiving the full inheritance of the believer. As he notes in verse 3:27, in Christ “there is...no male and female.”

To get back to the line of thinking of our text, it gives the impression that we already had the status of belonging to God and were simply waiting for Christ to come and complete the legal work to get our inheritance.

But there is a term used that readjusts this thinking. Let's return to our text at 4:4.

*<sup>4</sup> But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, <sup>5</sup> to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. <sup>6</sup> And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" <sup>7</sup> So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.*

Did you catch the term? It is at the end of verse 5— "adoption." Christ came that "we might receive adoption as sons." The truth is, we never were sons in the first place. That is where the analogy of guardianship falls short. It explains the role of the law but not our status before God.

Paul explains more clearly elsewhere our status without Christ. We are "children of wrath" (Eph. 2:3) and "sons of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2); we are "slaves of sin" (Rom. 6:20); we are "ungodly," "sinners," even "enemies" of God (Rom. 5:6–10). The only inheritance awaiting us is God's wrath.

So what has happened? God sent forth his Son. Christ came. He came to redeem us from our slavery to sin. He came to atone for our sins that God might justify us, declaring us innocent. But he did more. He did the work that brought us into God's family. The true Son of God has made us sinners sons of God. As Paul says in verse 7, we are no longer slaves but sons. And now that we are sons, we are heirs of all the riches of our Father. Let's think about some of those riches.

### **God is our Father**

Because of Jesus, we don't really appreciate this understanding of God as Father. Of course, we think, God is our Father. But before Jesus came on the scene, God was not viewed in such terms. He was Yahweh, Jehovah, the I Am Who I Am. His name was so holy among the Jews that they would use other names. God was holy. He was a Judge who demanded righteousness. Thus the law. One feared God; rarely did one think in terms of loving God. However much they may be thankful for his steadfast love toward them, for belonging to him as his people, Father was not in their vocabulary.

Then comes Jesus. He speaks almost exclusively of his Father, and he invites his followers to do the same. He speaks of "my Father and your Father." He teaches his followers to pray, "Our Father." He encourages his followers to pray, knowing that their Father will answer his children.

Even today we might think of God in other terms, especially as we think of our salvation. The gospel story goes like this: We were lost sinners, deserving God's judgment. Instead, Christ took our punishment and we were declared innocent. That is the doctrine of justification, and praise God for this truth. But what the doctrine of adoption teaches is that we were more than just let

off from our sentence of condemnation. We were more than released from prison or slavery. We were received into God's family. He is now our Father and we his children.

And here we grasp something more endearing. This adoption as sons means not only that we have a new legal status, that we have a great inheritance. Adoption means that we are God's children with all the love that comes with that idea. We now call out to the holy God, the majestic God of all that exists—we now call out to him "Abba, Daddy, Father." And he responds, "My child." "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are" (1 John 3:1). And just as a child may come to his father, no matter how important that father happens to be and as busy as he may be, so we may come to our heavenly Father anytime, anywhere we may be, knowing that he listens, knowing that he cares for us, knowing that he loves more than even an earthly father can know.

That's why Jesus came. That we might know the same love that he has known for eternity. "I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them," (John 17:26).

### **Christ is our Brother**

To be adopted is to know God as our Father. It is also to know Christ as our Brother. Jesus Christ is our Savior. He is our Champion who has won our salvation. He is our Redeemer who has paid the price for us. He is our Lord to whom we owe worship and allegiance. This Savior and Lord, though, is not ashamed to be called our Brother, or as the writer of Hebrews puts it, he is not ashamed to call us brothers (and sisters).

We belong to Jesus. Indeed, we only belong to God our Father because of the one who became our Brother. No one comes to the Father except through Jesus. Without Christ, we have no claim on God. He might be our Creator and we his creatures, but it is only because of his coming to us that we have "the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).

And now, as our big Brother, he identifies with us; he stands with us. He prays for us, pleads our case, protects us from our enemies. He does so because we are his brothers and sisters. That is what family does. He prayed for us earnestly the night before his death. He prayed that we would know his Father's love as he knows it. He prayed that we would know not only that the same love of his Father is in us, but that he himself is in us.

We are united with our Brother. We abide in him and he in us in deep, loving affection. Christ is not like the elder brother in the story of the prodigal son, begrudging the love of his Father for a wayward brother. No, he is the brother who rejoices in our coming home, who, indeed, looks to the day when we will join him at the feasting table of all God's children who have answered the call of the Son to believe in him and so receive the right to become children of God.

## **The Holy Spirit is in us**

To be adopted is to know God as Father and Christ as Brother. It is to know the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, it is by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that we know our Father in such a dear way.

*And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” (4:6)*

The Spirit of Christ speaks to our spirits so that we know God as Father not only because there is a doctrine informing us of the fact, not only because we can read about it in Scripture, but because we feel it in our very hearts.

Romans 8:15 speaks of the same thing: “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’” To call Father feels right because his Spirit makes it feel right.

## **We belong**

All of this is to say that to be in Christ is to be in the Spirit and to belong to the Father. To go back to those false teachers in Galatia. They were trying to say to the Gentile believers that they were second-class family members. To be more accepted, these so-called adopted siblings would have to follow the rules that they had always had to followed. By saying that, these teachers revealed that they missed the gospel altogether.

To believe that belonging to the covenant people of God meant abiding by the rules of the law, they did not have the Spirit of Christ in them. They were like the elder brother of the prodigal son, thinking that following the rules was what made one a son.

But no! Christ came that we might have the right to be called sons of God. Christ did the work of obedience. He obeyed the rules and fulfilled all the conditions of the law, so that we might be adopted by God, that we might already be accepted by God our Father as his sons with full inheritance. But even more dear to us, to be accepted by God as his beloved children.

There is nothing for us to prove. There is no favor to win. God does not look upon us with his arms folded waiting to see if we are going to be good enough to claim his name and his affection. He loves us because we are his children. And we know it to be so because the Spirit of his Son attests to our very hearts that it is so.

Let me speak to any who may be puzzled by all this. You may be one who has yet to believe in Jesus Christ to be your Savior. Or you may be one who has intellectually accepted the doctrines of the Christian faith, particularly as you have grown up in church. And yet, this crying out to God as Abba, Father; this feeling of being loved, of being deeply cared for by God as a loving Father loves and cares for his children—you can’t honestly say you have ever felt that way.

Jesus came as a child of earthly parents so that we might become children of our heavenly Father, just as he knows his Father. His prayer near the end of his life was that we might know this love. He has sent his Spirit so that we might even feel this love. Such Fatherly love is offered to you, if you will but cry out Abba, Father through the Son Jesus Christ.

God gave his Son to us. Will he not also give his Spirit by which we know his Son and through his Son know him? This Christmas receive the gift of the Son of God himself, and through receiving such a gift, receive the wondrous blessing of becoming a son, a beloved child of God the Father.