

*But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law,<sup>5</sup> to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.<sup>6</sup> Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.”<sup>7</sup> So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir. (Galatians 4:4-7)*

### What did You Get for Christmas?

These days, when I ask kids what they got for Christmas, I don't always understand the answer. I just don't have little children anymore, so I don't always know what cool toys even are. But I have noticed that what you want for Christmas differs dramatically depending on what age you are and what your interests are. For instance, this year, three different people gave me books. I was pretty happy about that. No one gave me clothes this year, but it doesn't bother me when they do. In fact, sometimes I really like it. For instance, if someone gave me a Chicago Bears tie, I'd be in heaven. But when I was a kid, getting clothes was like getting underwear for Christmas. I wanted some cool toy. I wanted some gizmo that would make the other kids ooh and ah. So where you are in life and what you like definitely affects what you hope to get for Christmas. This morning, St. Paul reminds us of what God gave us for Christmas. When I say God, I mean specifically God the Father. Someone I know once argued that Christmas is really a celebration of the gift God the Father gave to the world. This morning, we want to remember the gifts he gave us on the first Christmas morning and that he still gives us because of the first Christmas.

#### I.

**So what did you get for Christmas? God gave you his Son.** St. Paul wrote, **“But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.”** What does he mean by “when the time had fully come”? He means that the world had to wait for this gift. When I was a kid, I used to hate waiting to open our Christmas presents. It was torture to see them under the tree and not be able to open them. I used to wheedle and beg, “Can't we open just one?” I'm very thankful that my kids did not follow in my footsteps on that score.

Israel had to wait 1500 years from Mt. Sinai to Bethlehem. “The fullness of time” included the house of David being reduced to a mere stump of its former glory. Instead of being a prince, Joseph was a carpenter. God had decreed that from a house fallen into nothing, the true Son of David and King of Israel would come. The fullness of time included Rome ruling the known world. Why? First of all, so that Caesar Augustus could send Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, because that's where the child had to be born. But that wasn't the only reason. The Romans provided an era of peace and relatively safe travel. They cleared pirates off the Mediterranean Sea and they built roads all through their empire. Under their watch, Greek became the language of trade and commerce throughout the western world. Why did all that matter? Because God's plan was to raise up the New Testament Church after Jesus ascended. So the fullness of time included putting everything in place so that within a generation of Jesus' ascension, the gospel could spread throughout the known world. And it wouldn't be limited to Jews anymore. In fact, the majority of Christians would be gentiles like us. The fullness of time included having those Romans there in Jerusalem to execute Jesus. We could mention many other things. But the point is, the first Christmas came when God was ready, and not one moment before or after.

When it came, God sent his Son born of a woman. That was God's gift to the world. Stop and think about what that meant in heaven. The Father asked his Son to take on human flesh and to be born in this world. He asked him to lay aside his power and glory as God – his right as the Son of God – and come down here and live a life of poverty and humiliation. He asked him to suffer on the cross as a criminal, worse to suffer hell itself as a sinner and then to die. And for what? For sinners like us that don't deserve it and don't always appreciate it. For sinners the world over who would reject what he did and disbelieve it. For sinners who would believe but would confuse the issues and twist the doctrines again and again, and who would fail to live up to all that God has said. God the Father sent his Son to do all those things, and the Son agreed.

He was born of a woman, born under law. Jesus was just as human as we are. Because he was, he submitted to God's laws. God didn't give the Ten Commandments for himself. He gave them for us. And he

gave all the other special Jewish laws for that people. Those things don't apply to God the Father and they didn't apply to his Son – until that Son took on human flesh and stood in our place. Jesus came down here and he lived as one of us, so that he could take our place in life and death, so that he could redeem us who have no choice but to live under God's law.

God gave that gift of love because we are sinners. I don't really need to tell you that – you know your own sin better than I possibly could. You know those moments when you just feel guilty about what you've said to your spouse or your children or your parents. You know the things you've done and the things you've left undone. You know the things that you just don't want to think about, and yet, they keep coming back. Guilt is something that most of us can't help feeling because it's knowing that I haven't lived the way God calls me to. And at its heart is a terrible fear that if God really does punish sin, then I'm going to be in deep trouble when I die – and maybe even before that.

God does punish sin. And every one of us should be in trouble. But that's why Christmas is a season of joy. God sent his only begotten son to born of woman, born under law, to redeem us who are under the law, who deserve death and hell for all that we have done. Not only did Christ live a perfect life that more than replaces all the sins of all people everywhere, he died. He suffered the pain and hell and the humiliation that we sinners deserve. He died and he paid for every human being who will ever live. He paid for you and he paid for me. Then he rose to show us that his payment was enough. God's justice is satisfied. And we will not be punished. We will live with him in joy forever.

God sent his Son to redeem us who were born under the law so that we might receive the full rights of sons. Our translation here is a little free because the editors were trying to capture the importance of the statement. The Greek says simply so that we might receive adoption. Almost every time I administer a private baptism, I talk about adoption. I often tell a story about a WELS family that came to Colombia to adopt a child while I was a missionary there. They had a little girl back home in Minnesota. They left her with grandparents and spent thousands of dollars traveling to country that they didn't know. They spent weeks waiting for final approval and thousands more dollars paying fees and living in a hotel for those weeks, all so that they could take a child they had never seen before, a child that they owed nothing, and make that child their own. Today, I'm sure the child calls them "mom" and "dad." I'm sure he's loved and care for.

Adoption is a wonderful picture of God's love for us in Christ because the parent is the one who does everything. The child simply receives the love. And it's a wonderful picture because there is always a cost involved in adoption. Jesus paid that cost. He became a human being. He died and he rose. He did it all so that we can be a part of God's family. And his Father sent him to do all that. That is our Christmas gift.

## II.

When you get to this phrase which our Bible translates as "the full rights of sons," most of the modern translations follow the King James which said, "the adoption of sons." In Greek, it's just one word "adoption," but all the way back to the 1600's, English translators have expanded it to a phrase. Why? Because they're trying to convey the point of what it means to be adopted. It means that you're a member of the family. It means that you have certain rights and privileges. When I was a child, I inherited my great-grandmother's wedding ring. My mom talked to me about that ring. She impressed on me that I needed to leave it to one of my children. It needed to stay in the family. I asked her, "What about an adopted a child?" My mom said, "That's OK, because that's still your child." God wants us to have all the rights and privileges that go with being his child, so he adopted us. He gives us those rights and privileges personally through the work of the Holy Spirit. **What did you get for Christmas? God gave you the Holy Spirit.**

St. Paul said, "**Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.'**" So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir." God sent the Holy Spirit into our hearts. In Greek, Paul uses the exact same word that he used in the previous verses to say that God sent his Son to be born of a woman. In both cases, the Father gives to us his most precious gifts, the Son and the Holy Spirit who are one with him in the godhead.

God didn't send the Spirit to be take on human flesh, God sent him into our hearts. He makes what Christ did ours. Jesus died and paid for all people everywhere. Yet, not all people will make it to heaven. Why not? Because they don't trust in what he did. They either don't think the danger of going to hell is real because they think they're not so bad or they think that there is another solution, one that involves us trying harder, or making a better offering, or changing our lives. So they insist on being judged on the basis of their

goodness or the changes they've made rather than on the work of Christ. God obliges them and then condemns them to hell.

But God sent the Holy Spirit to work through the gospel. He came to you and me and he entered our hearts and he gave us faith. He made us understand and trust that we are indeed God's children. We have the full rights as heirs of our heavenly Father. Paul says, that Spirit cries out inside us – in other words, he lead us to have a new spirit that cries out, "*Abba*, Father." Now what does that mean? *Abba* is an Aramaic word that means "Father." In Jewish homes, it was used as a familiar term that children would use with their dads. It also was used for rabbis, probably to underline the idea that the rabbis were spiritual fathers to their people. It's almost never used in Jewish literature for God. But in the New Testament, three times it is used for God. The first time was in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus the true Son of God used this term for his Father. St. Paul copied that usage twice. Why? Because the gift of God is that we now stand next to Jesus. We aren't slaves anymore. We aren't servants in a master's household. We are children. And we can come to God in prayer as to our own dear Father, and he promises that he will hear us and answer us like a loving Father always will.

That's the practical side of being adopted into God's family. It's all a gift of God. We don't decide to become his children any more than orphans decide to be adopted. God sends the gospel to us. In that message the Holy Spirit enters our hearts and gives us faith. Faith means that we grab onto all that God has promised us and we hang on, no matter how hard or scary this life is. We are the ones who believe. But we only can believe because we have the Holy Spirit. Because we believe, our lives are different. We pray. We trust. We belong.

We are heirs. An heir receives a gift from his father. I started out this morning talking about what we got for Christmas, but the truth is, that doesn't come close to asking what you got as an inheritance. God has given you Christ. God has given you the Holy Spirit. God has made you a part of his family, so you and I own the universe. We're only waiting until Jesus returns and the whole world can see that. But already now, our Father loves us and does all things for us. He sends the Spirit to teach us to pray and to trust. All that is our Christmas present. Rejoice in the riches of God's love. Amen.