

Galatians 3:26 - 4:7

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[0 : 00] What is Christmas all about?

Now, I acknowledge that that's a very predictable question to pose as we kick off a sermon on the 23rd of December, the last Sunday before Christmas.

But though it is predictable, it's also critical. It's also very important for us to be able to answer that question, what is Christmas all about?

And to try and answer that question, I'm not going to turn to what we might call the usual suspects in terms of Christmas texts, the birth narratives in Matthew's gospel or Luke's gospel that we have read from Matthew's gospel, but rather to words that were written by the apostle Paul in the letter that he wrote to the church in Galatia.

And our second reading was from that letter of Paul to the Galatians. We read from chapter 3 and then through to verse 7 of chapter 4.

[1 : 09] But our focus this morning will be very particularly on words that relate to the Christmas events that we are remembering and celebrating. In verse 4 of chapter 4 we read, But when the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman.

And it goes on. But even in these words, at the beginning of the verse, we have the Christmas events described in synthesis. God sent His Son, born of a woman.

And so I want to think about what these words, what this verse in particular, not just verse 4, particularly verse 4, though we'll look on and note one or two things that are said in the following verses, what these words, what this statement of Paul tells us.

And we're going to consider what Paul says in these verses under the following, let's call them seasonal headings. First of all, we want to speak about Christmastime, Christmastime.

But then we want to think about and discover more about the Christmastime. So, Christmastime, Christmastime, but also to explore and discover a little bit about what we might call the Christmas mission.

[2 : 27] So, these will be the three headings that guide us in what we want to say this morning. Christmastime, Christmastime, Christmastime, and Christmastime.

First of all then, Christmastime, or we might go on to describe or give as a subtitle to that heading or a subheading, the when of Christmas, the when of Christmas, Christmastime, the when of Christmas.

Now, I think we're often reminded that Jesus wasn't born on Christmas Day. You know, we'll be celebrating Christmas.

It's two sleeps away, as we were reminded this morning, and on the 25th of December. And we know, of course, that that wasn't the actual day on which Jesus was born.

We don't know the exact date or even with certainty the year of Jesus' birth. We can estimate with some degree of accuracy in terms of the year, but not with complete certainty.

[3 : 33] And it doesn't really matter as long as we hold firmly, as we do, to the historicity of the event itself. We may not know the day, we may not even know for sure the year, but we do know and hold firmly to it being a historical event.

But like so many other historical events that we don't doubt the truth of, we aren't able to know the exact when of Christmas, to take this back to this first heading, Christmastime, the when of Christmas.

But while we don't know the day, we do know the time. Now, that sounds a bit incongruous. How can we know the time if we don't know the day?

What mystery is this? When was Jesus born of a woman? When did the Father send His Son?

Well, Paul tells us, or he gives us one answer with regard to the time at the very beginning of this

verse, but when the time had fully come.

When the time had fully come. This is, if you wish, the time reference. When did Jesus come into the world? When was the baby born in Bethlehem? Well, the baby was born when the time had fully come, or when the fullness of time had come.

[4 : 55] Now, what does this expression tell us? What does it tell us about God and His providence or sovereign rule in all and over all?

Well, it tells us of a God who is over time, who governs time. Time is always His time. He did not, does not, and cannot ever act under constraint of any description.

Time is never God's enemy. He knows nothing of the pressure of time. He acts in His time, when the time was fully come.

But I think we can further notice, as well as that general truth concerning God's governance over time, we can notice two more particular truths regarding this expression, the fullness of time, with respect to Christmas and God's saving mission.

I think the first thing we can say is that the time when Jesus was born was the time determined by God in eternity. In eternity, the triune God conceived this plan of redemption.

[6 : 10] And in eternity, the time was set. Christmas Day was marked in the divine calendar. And having been determined on the appointed day, at the appointed time, Jesus was born.

But then another thing we can say, and it's very much related to that, is that this was the time for the fulfillment of God's promises and prophecies and purposes.

You know, from the time of man's fall in the Garden of Eden, God graciously promised a coming Redeemer, the seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent.

And through the prophets, God foretold the coming of Messiah. By the giving of the law, God provided a schoolmaster that would, in due time, lead those under law to the one who alone would fulfill the law.

The time, God's time, had come. But when the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman.

[7 : 22] Christmas time, the when of Christmas. But moving on to what we might call the heart of the matter, and that is the Christmas child. And we might subhead that, the who of Christmas.

If we've already considered the when of Christmas, let's think now about the who of Christmas. This Christmas child that is spoken of in this verse. God sent His Son.

Who is the Christmas child born in Bethlehem? Who is the Redeemer? Now, in a few moments, when we come towards the end of the sermon, we'll note that in a very real sense, the who of Christmas is God, the triune God.

But for the moment, we focus on the one who, in some sense, does take center stage of the persons of the Trinity. One who takes center stage at Christmas time, when the time had fully come.

The baby born in Bethlehem. And what does Paul tell us about the Christmas child? Well, he tells us a few things. There's three that we want to notice in particular.

[8 : 34] And just in the order in which we discover these truths in the verse that we're looking at. We read, but when the time had fully come, God sent His Son.

The first thing that he tells us about the one born in Bethlehem is that He is God's Son. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God.

God's one and only Son, or only begotten Son, to use the language of John in John 3.16. God's Son in a unique and exclusive way.

Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is truly and eternally divine. In the language of the Nicene Creed, very God of very God.

That's the first thing we discover about the Christmas child, the who of Christmas. He is the Son of God, God's own Son. But the next thing that we're told is that He was born of a woman.

[9 : 38] When the time had fully come, God sent His Son born of a woman. The Son of God, and yet born of a woman. Now, the very fact that we bring these two truths together is astonishing.

How can it be? And I don't pretend to be able to give a fully comprehensive answer to that question. How can it be that the eternal Son of God can also be the one born of a woman?

And though it's not possible for me to explain that, nonetheless, I would invite you to stand in awe and in wonder at the truth and the reality of it.

Born of a woman. Words that employ no more and no less than that Jesus had a true human mother. He was, He became a man. Truly, and from the moment of His conception, eternally human.

And that is a wonder of wonders. The creator of the universe became a man. So, that's the second thing that Paul tells us about the Christmas child.

[10:49] He is the Son of God. God sent His Son. He then tells us that He was born of a woman. But then he goes on to say something else about Him that we maybe don't immediately or so immediately identify the significance of.

What does he go on to say? He says, But when the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under law. What is Paul telling us when he describes Jesus as having been born under law?

What does this mean? Though He was the author of the law, He willingly placed Himself under law, subject to its demands and charged with perfectly fulfilling its righteousness.

He became, in a sense, a slave to the law. And He did so consciously and willingly and deliberately. We see in these few words, in these truths about Jesus, that He is God's eternal Son, that He is truly man, that He willingly and deliberately placed Himself under the law.

We see in these truths the manner in which Jesus was so uniquely qualified to be the Redeemer of humankind. So uniquely qualified to reconcile men and women to God, to stand in the breach between God and humankind.

[12:22] He was and is fully divine and fully human. And He is the one who both submitted to God's law and succeeded in rendering perfect obedience to God's law.

And so for all of these reasons, He is uniquely and perfectly suited to His task of being that bridge between God and men, between a holy God and a sinful humanity.

And so we have the who of Christmas, the Christmas child, the Son of God, born of a woman, born under law. But that takes us to the third seasonal heading, which we've described as the Christmas mission, or the why of Christmas.

Why did God send His Son into this world? And if we had to hone in on one word from the passage before us, then I guess that one word would be redemption.

And we read there in verse 4, But when the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem. There you have this indication of purpose.

[13:43] The why. To redeem those under law. God sent His Son to redeem. God sent His Son to save sinners such as we are.

But let's think a little bit more about that. Let's think about who are to be redeemed and how we are to be redeemed. First of all, let's think about the who. Who were those who were to be redeemed by the one sent by God the Father?

Who did the Christmas child come to redeem? Well, those who were to be redeemed are also described in our text. We're told to redeem those under law.

To redeem those under law. Now, in expressing himself in this way, Paul is, if you like, using theological shorthand that points to three core truths about men and women, about you and me, about humanity, when he uses this expression that we are under law.

One truth that is implicit in that language is that we are all subject to God's law. We may deny that reality.

[14:59] We may rebel against that. We may claim that we don't acknowledge God's law. But despite our protestations, the reality is that we are all subject to God's law.

Now, this was very particularly for the Jews who were under obligation as the recipients of the law, if you wish. But the absence in this verse of the article where it says simply born under law or those under law is possibly deliberate on the part of Paul to make clear that the obligation to the law extends to all.

We are all subject to God's law. Some have greater knowledge of what that law is than others, but we are all subject to it. And, of course, with greater knowledge, greater responsibility, which would be true for all of us gathered here this morning.

But all of us are subject to God's law. That is implicit in this language that Jesus came to redeem those under law. But the other thing that's implicit in the vocabulary is that we are all lawbreakers. There would be no need for redemption if we were not lawbreakers. Paul doesn't say that here explicitly, but he's very eloquent on the subject elsewhere in his letters, that we are all lawbreakers.

[16:25] We all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But I think there's perhaps a third truth that is implicit in this language to redeem those under law, and that is that we are all under the curse of the law.

Having broken that which we were subject to, there are consequences of that. We are under the curse of the law. The law accuses us as lawbreakers.

The law enslaves us because we're incapable of keeping it, but it also accuses us as we are guilty of breaking it. And there's nothing that we can do to resolve that reality.

We can only at best acknowledge it to be true. And Jesus was sent to redeem those under law. That would be you and me. This was his Christmas mission, the why of Christmas. Why was he sent? Why did the Father send his son? Why was he born of a woman?

[17:25] Why was he born under law? To redeem those under law. But that leads on to another subsequent question that, again, isn't explicitly dealt with by Paul in our passage, but we can develop from what he says.

And that's simply the question, how are we to be redeemed? So we acknowledge that Jesus is the Redeemer. We acknowledge that he came for that purpose. We acknowledge that we are in need of redemption. But then we're still left with this question, how are we to be redeemed?

And as I say, although Paul doesn't explicitly deal with that in these verses, the very word redemption does give us some helpful clues. The verb to redeem is a verb that speaks of buying back or paying a ransom price.

The Greek word was a word that would have been used in the marketplace, and especially in a slave market. If somebody was of a mind to buy the freedom of a slave, then this is the word that would have been used to describe that transaction, what was paid in order to provide the slave with freedom, with liberty.

And so the very word gives us a clue as to the how of redemption. To redeem is to buy back. It's to pay a ransom price.

[18:48] Now, we know who is being bought. That would be us, those under law. We know who is doing the buying. Well, that's Jesus, God's own son.

He came to pay that price. But how does he do so? How does Jesus pay the price that needs to be paid? Well, we can do no better than allow Jesus to answer the question for us.

In Mark chapter 10 and in verse 45, Jesus himself tackles that question and answers it very eloquently as he describes his own mission.

He spoke in these terms, For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

The Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many, to pay the ransom price. At heart, this points to the giving of his own righteous, law-fulfilling life over to death in our place.

[19:55] His life, his shed blood, his death is the price paid to redeem the lost. No higher price could have been paid, and no lesser price would have sufficed to secure your redemption.

So those under law are redeemed or freed by means of the price paid by Jesus. But freed from what? Clearly freed from slavery of one kind or another, but how can we develop that a little bit more?

Freed from what? Well, in this same letter to the Galatians, we're told that we are freed from the curse of the law, the law's power to accuse us. In the previous chapter, in chapter 3 and in verse 13, we read Christ redeemed us.

The same language of redemption. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. So we're freed from the curse of the law. We're freed from the guilt of sin.

In the subsequent letter to the Ephesians in chapter 1 and in verse 7, we read, in him, that is in Jesus, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins.

[21:12] It's almost as if Paul is giving an answer to the question, well, what does this redemption mean, this redemption in his blood? Well, this is what it means, the forgiveness of sins.

Freed from the guilt of sin. And freed also from an empty way of life. In the first letter of Peter, in chapter 1 and verse 18, listen to what is said there.

We read, for you know that it was not with perishable things, such as silver or gold, that you were redeemed from the empty way of life, handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

So there very clearly, we've been given the truth that we've just noted, that Jesus paid the price with his own life. But it there also highlights one element or one aspect of what we were being freed from, this empty, worthless way of life that we had inherited from our fathers.

But there is another matter, for we are not only freed from all of these things, the curse of the law, the guilt of sin, an empty way of life, but we are freed for.

[22 : 27] And our passage does very explicitly speak about what we are freed for. We are redeemed for a purpose. And let's just notice what Paul says there in verse 5.

To redeem those under law, that, and so then it goes on to say something of what we will enjoy as a result, that we might receive the full rights of sons.

Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, Abba, Father, so you're no longer a slave, but a son. And since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

Paul here doesn't give us an exhaustive presentation of God's purposes in redemption, what we have been freed for. But he does identify a central purpose for His redeemed people.

That we there in verse 5 that introduces this purpose statement. It answers the question, why did God redeem His people? So that we might receive the full rights of sons.

[23 : 39] God's redemption is rich beyond measure. We're not just freed from the curse of the law. A great blessing, though, that would be. Not only freed from the guilt of sin, not only delivered from an empty way of life, but we are freed for adoption into God's family.

Somebody has rather helpfully captured the reality with this sentence. The Son became a slave that slaves might become sons.

The Son became a slave that slaves might become sons. The manner we become sons is by the redemption price paid by Jesus.

But the manner in which we are made to appreciate and experience our sonship is by the sending of the Spirit of the Son into our hearts, which is what Paul goes on to say.

Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of His Son into our heart, the Spirit who calls out, Abba, Father. This is the means that God has provided to enable us to recognize who we are and live who we are, to experience the reality of that sonship and to be able to address God as our Father.

[25 : 00] The Spirit indwells us and convinces us of our new identity. That is, much that could be said concerning all that is envisaged or implied in our sonship.

This very rich expression, the full rights of sons. And also our consequent status as heirs. But let me limit myself to one deeply humbling and richly precious truth that we can draw from this.

Privilege that is ours as sons. When the time had fully come, God the Father sent His one and only Son to pay the ultimate price in the giving of His own life to death on the cross in our place.

And why did He do such a thing? That you and I might be able to call Him and to call out to Him, Abba, Father. That we might be able to do that and that it would be true.

That we would be able to relate to God as our Father, address Him as our Father, know Him and experience Him as our loving Heavenly Father. That is why He sent His Son, to grant us this immeasurable privilege.

[26 : 18] As we draw the threads together of what we've been discovering here, as we look back on what's been said, we have discovered in these verses, or what we've discovered in these verses, it becomes, I think, strikingly clear that redemption is a work of the triune God.

God is the who of redemption. Not just God the Son, but God, the triune God, is the who of redemption, the who of Christmas. God the Father sends God the Son.

God the Son, driven by loyalty to the Father and love for the lost, willingly takes on the redeeming work commended to Him. And God the Spirit is sent into our hearts to seal the deal, if you wish, in our experience, in our being able to identify ourselves for who we are, sons of the living and true God.

What is Christmas all about? 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.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for Your grace and Your love and Your boundless generosity in sending and giving Your own Son to be our Savior.

[27 : 55] We thank You for all that has been secured for us. We thank You for the enormous privilege of being brought into Your family and being given the full rights of sons and heirs.

We acknowledge that eternity itself will not provide time sufficient for us to appreciate all the privileges that come with such a status. But we thank You for the excitement that there is in discovering, little by little, all that we are and all that we have been given in Jesus. And we pray these things in His name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.