

Paul's Christmas Message.

Text: Gal. 4:1-7

Suggested Hymns:

632, 626, 625, 839, 26

1) A Picture Of God

2) A Picture Of The Spiritually Mature Christian Person

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Galatians 4:1-7, *¹ Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all, ² but is under guardians and stewards until the time appointed by the father. ³ Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world.*

⁴ But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. ⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!"

⁷ Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ. (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The Sunday after Christmas has been called "*the forgotten Sunday.*" Tucked away between the exciting lustre of the Christmas festival and the cheerful expectancy of the New Year season, like a valley between two towering mountain ranges, this last Sunday of the year seems to have no special glory of its own.

Worshippers who attended special Christmas services often feel that they can skip this service. This situation is unfortunate, because the traditional Epistle for this day in the liturgical church calendar is truly magnificent. It shines forth from the pages of Holy Writ as one of the most glorious of all Christmas texts — a text

so full of meaning that one shrinks from attempting to deal with it in our narrow space of time.

This text was written by the Apostle Paul, who on the first Christmas Day was not yet born, or was but a babe. But the Christmas thought was clearly in his mind when he wrote these divinely inspired words, originally addressed by him to the churches in Galatia, congregations Paul had established on his first missionary journey.

These people had accepted the Gospel of Christ gladly. But after a while false teachers invaded their ranks, with the result that these people, somewhat unstable, were beginning to waver. To combat this situation Paul wrote this inspired letter. It was a serious matter, a matter of spiritual life or death to those to whom he wrote.

And in our text for today he reaches a climax, inviting them to look backward and forward, inward and upward, as he applies to their needs the strengthening Christmas Gospel.

Let us therefore consider *Paul's Christmas Message*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. In This Message Paul Gives Us A Picture Of God

Among the most disturbing questions in people's minds are questions about God. They are wondering and asking: "*Who is God? What do we know about God? What happened in the beginning? If God made us, why did He make us? Why did He put us here? Is God interested in us? Does He have a plan for our lives? Where are we headed?*"

In giving us a picture of God in his Christmas message, the Apostle Paul touches on these questions — the greatest questions that have ever troubled the human mind.

Paul Speaks of the Person of God

Although he does not make it a major point of our text, the Apostle, it is interesting to note, answers the question, "*Who is God?*" by giving us a brief description of the Person of God.

He says, "*God sent forth His Son,*" and he adds, in effect: "God has sent forth the Holy Spirit into your hearts, teaching you to say 'Father' to God."

Thus, in giving us this sketch of God's Person, the Apostle makes a clear reference to the three Persons of the Holy Trinity — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

As we stand here today in the afterglow of Christmas, you and I should never think of God, as so many people do, as some sort of vague, hazy Spirit, a mere Force or Power in nature, the great Unknown; but we should always think of God as a personal Being existing from eternity, a personal Being with intellect and will, with the power of action and decision, with almighty, creative energy and infinite love — one God, only one — yet three separate and distinct Persons — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, working together to build human lives for time and for eternity.

Paul Speaks of the Plan of God

The Apostle unfolds a second point in giving us a picture of God. In his Christmas message Paul makes mention not only of the Person of God but also of the plan of God. He says: *“⁴ But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.”*

The expression *“when the fullness of the time had come”* indicates that God had a plan. In the councils of the Holy Trinity this plan was conceived in eternity. It began with a divine decree to create. In order to manifest His wisdom and goodness and power,¹ God created.

And in order to share His life and His love, God said: *“Let Us make man in Our image!”* Isn't that statement interesting? You and I know that, in order to enjoy something to its fullest, we have to share it with someone else. And so God Himself, not by compulsion, but out of love, wants to share His life and love; and so He creates man, giving him life, the very life of God, the life of love.

Thus it was God's original plan that we should be like Him, in the image of God, without sin, perfect in righteousness and holiness, being like God, thinking and talking in the way God would think and talk, linked with God in perfect love.

But man frustrated God's plan. He fell into sin. But God was not through. He prepared a second blueprint for man's happiness. He resolved to send Christ,

the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, who eventually came and redeemed us, achieving for us the forgiveness of sins and re-linking us with God.

And now God sends the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity, into our hearts, to bring us to faith in Christ, because it is through faith in Christ that we enter once more into this harmonious relationship with God!

And then the Holy Spirit goes to work in us, through Holy Baptism, through the Gospel, through the Lord's Supper, renewing and restoring within us that divine image, step by step, nursing us along to a point where we will seek to reflect God with a life of unselfish love in our relationship with others.

This is God's plan — to reach down to us through Christ, and through us and our witness of love to have the Holy Spirit reach out to others, so that an ever-increasing number of people may share in God's plan of love.

Paul has this picture of God's plan in mind when he says in his Christmas message: *When the fullness of the time had come* [that is, when God had prepared the world through His prophets and set the stage through His providence], *God sent forth His Son, born of a woman.*

Notice the reference to the virgin birth of Christ. How strange it would sound if we said, for instance: *"In the sixteenth century came Martin Luther, the hero of the Reformation, born of a woman."* We don't talk in that way, but Paul has a reason for adding, *"born of a woman."*

For the plan of God called for a miraculous conception by the power of the Holy Spirit. In this manner the Second Person of the Trinity took upon Himself the human nature; and, as Paul continues, *"His Son, born of a woman,"* ⁵ *to redeem those who were under the law,*" that is, all of us, who by our sins have violated the Law of God and exposed ourselves to its dread penalty.

Christ by His perfect fulfilment of the Law, and by His death as an atoning sacrifice redeemed us from the curse of the Law, *"that we might receive the adoption as sons,"* that through Christ and by the impact of the Holy Spirit on our hearts we might be adopted by God into His glorious family.

2. In This Message Paul Also Gives Us A Picture Of The Spiritually Mature Christian Person

But in his Christmas message Paul gives us not only a picture of God, His Person and His plan, but also a picture of the spiritually mature Christian Person.

It is a picture of how you should look when you are linked with God through Christ and the Holy Spirit invades your inner man through the power of the Gospel.

From Servitude to Sonship

First, it is a picture of how you have been liberated from servitude and elevated to sonship. What does that mean? In our text Paul presents a picture taken from the world of his day. He makes a comparison.

He says: “When a rich man has a son, that son may be the prospective heir of everything the father owns; but so long as he is a child, he has no freedom to use these things. He is no better off than a servant.

But the day comes when the father finally says: ‘Now, my son, you have reached maturity; now you are no longer under the control of tutors and nurses and governors; now it is time for you to live your own life; now you shall begin to enjoy what is your inheritance.’ Then the day of freedom has come.”

“*Even so*,” said Paul to these Galatian Christians (and Paul includes himself, and perhaps he includes also some of you, those who like Paul have come to Christ the Saviour later in life), *Even so we*.

Before we came to spiritual maturity, before we were linked with God through Christ, we were like little children. We were in bondage to the Law. We felt that we could get right with God by observing many rules and regulations. We acted as if the only thing that counted in our relationship with God was following a code of do’s and don’t’s.

We lived as if the only important thing in our religious life was performing the prescribed duties of our spiritual superiors. Thus we were enslaved by the Law, bound by it and in bondage to it — in servitude.

⁴ *But when the fullness of the time had come*, but now Christmas has come, Paul continues. “God sent forth His Son to redeem us from the bonds of the Law. Now we are free people. Through faith in Christ we have been elevated to sonship; we have grown up into spiritual maturity.”

Thus, in giving us his picture of the Christian person, Paul describes him as a free, liberated child of God. As we stand here today in the afterglow of Christmas, you and I should understand and be grateful for this spiritual freedom of man.

It means that in your relationship to God you are free — through faith in Christ. You don't come to church and go to Holy Communion and give and serve God and man because you must do these things, coerced by someone holding a club over your head. Rather, as a liberated child of God you do these things because you are under the compulsion of love.

The “must” of your life has been replaced by the compelling power of love, which says, “I want to do it!” Love is an act of the will and the mind in which you determine to help other people, out of gratitude for the love which God has shown you.

Love says: *“I want to do that good work. I want to make my life count because God has allowed His love to flow into me, and now as a vessel of God I want to release love. I want to reflect God in my little world and associations by producing those deeds and having those qualities which are like God in love.”*

In giving his picture of the Christian person the Apostle further describes him as one who can look up to God and say confidently, “*Abba*,” which is Aramaic for “*Father*.”

It is a wonderful thing to have this trust in God as your Father. *As a father pities his children, So the LORD pities those who fear Him.*² We are living in uncertain times. We wonder what is going to happen from one day to the next.

But now your Father promises you that if you and your children seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, then He will always in His own wonderful manner provide for you and your family in your bodily needs, no matter what tomorrow may bring.

Your Heavenly Father says: *“Do not view with regret and fret over the blunders of the past. Do not view with panic and aimless worry the uncertainties of the future. Live one day at a time, doing the best you can with what you have each day, and leave the rest to Me.”* He promises in Psalm 55:22, ²² *Cast your*

burden on the LORD, And He shall sustain you; He shall never permit the righteous to be moved.

Your Father also assures you that you are His heir, for a glorious inheritance awaits you in the everlasting Christmas, and life on earth is only a moment in comparison with the unending joy of being with Him forever in heaven, together with all who shared your faith in the Saviour.

Paul summarises it all in this closing verse of our text: ⁷ ***Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.***

And he expands upon this thought in this great passage of his Epistle to the Romans, written in Romans 8:13–17, ¹³ ***For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.*** ¹⁴ ***For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.***

¹⁵ ***For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father.”*** ¹⁶ ***The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,*** ¹⁷ ***and if children, then heirs — heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.***

From Sonship to Stewardship

The closing words of our text, ***“Then an heir of God through Christ,”*** suggest our final thought: The Christian person, as pictured by Paul, realising that he has been elevated from servitude to son-ship, also accepts the responsibility of having been called from sonship to stewardship.

The Christian person says: “Since I am an heir of God, all my possessions and powers of body and soul are gifts from God, a trust which my Father has placed into my care, and therefore I want to use these gifts faithfully by being a co-worker with God in sharing with others His plan of love.”

Thus the spiritually mature Christian person, conscious of his individual responsibility to God as a son and steward, thinks of himself as having a divine calling, a calling from God to build the next person for time and for eternity through unselfish love and his witness for Christ.

Throughout the New Testament the inspired writers stress the fact that every Christian has a divine calling. Martin Luther mentions five callings: first, your

calling as a husband and father, or as a wife and mother, that is, your divine calling to build up the next person starts right in your own home.

Second, you have this calling as a citizen in your community; third, in your occupation; fourth, in your church membership. Love in the church means that each person in the church is thinking of building up the other Christian.

And, fifth, you have this calling also in your social responsibility. Thus in every area of life we, as the heirs of God, are to carry the spirit of Christmas into the life of the next individual so that another human being might become a son and an heir of God.

That is our assignment. May Paul's Christmas message help make us competent to do it! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Psa. 104:24; Psa 136:5-9

² Psalm 103:13