

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Galatians 4:1-7, 8-11
“Must-A-Been The Right Time”
(First in a series on unlikely Christmas texts)

November 29, 2015
(1st Sunday of Advent)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

GALATIANS 4:1-7 8-11
"MUST-A-BEEN THE RIGHT TIME!"

All Are Slaves; All Need Liberation

A. vv.1-7 ADOPTION THROUGH CHRIST AND THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

4:1-7 Recapitulates 3:23-29, 4:3-6//3:13-14

1) vv.1-2 Four Key Terms: Heir, Child, Slave, Father.

Analogy/Image = Extended Household, *Oikos*
Extends Thought Of Previous Section

1 I mean that an **heir**, as long as he is a **child**, is no better than a **slave**,
2 though he is owner (lord) of all the estate;
but is under guardians and trustees
until the date set by his **Father**.

Enslaved Heir = Rhetorical Exaggeration

Situation Where Father Has Possibly Died

Appointed By Father, Legal/Financial Supervision Of A Minor
2 Stages, Temporary, Likely A Slave Charged With Oversight

Under Guardians, Sin, Law, Cosmic Powers = Bondage

2) v.3 Human Situation: Bondage To Evil Supernatural Powers.

Analogy Applied

3 So (even) with us: when we were children (minors),
we were slaves to *the elemental spirits of the universe*.

Heir Under Guards, We Are Under The *Stoicheia*

Jewish Christians,? 2:16, 3:13, 3:23-24

Stoicheia tou kosmou, Disputed Meaning? Col. 2:8, 20

Likely Demonic Forces That Control *This Present Evil Age*, 1:4, Eph. 6:4

2') vv.4-5 God's Answer: Christ Brings Redemption & Adoption Through His Sent Son.

Right Time, Right One, Right Mother, Right Religion, Right Need, Right Goal

4 **But when the time had fully come,**

Cosmic Rescue, Apocalyptic Scenario, Father's Initiative, Rom. 8:3-4

The Good Law Of God Reveals Our Inability To Obey, Judges Us

Invasion From Heaven/ Incarnation/ Fully Divine, Fully Human

a **God sent forth his Son,**

b **born of woman, born under the law,**

Mary, Fully Human, Fully Jewish, Mt. 11:11, Job 14:1

b' **to redeem those who were under the law,**

3:13, To The Jewish People //3:23, 4:5, 5:18

a' **so that we might receive adoption as sons.**

Jewish Xns, Purposes: Ransom (Slave Freed), Adoption

Subjection *Under Ends, On Gentile Ransom, I Cor. 6:20, 7:23, Eph. 2:11-19*

1') vv.6-7 Four Key Terms: Father, Slave, Son, Heir.

Spirit Is Active To Form Christ In Us

Status Change, Our Inheritance As Adoptees Is The Experience Of God's Spirit! 3:1-5, 6ff.

6 And because you are sons,

Adoption & Spirit Reception Are Distinguishable/Inseparable In Conversion

God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying,

3:1-6, 2 Cor. 3:17, Trinitarian Language!

"**Abba! Father!**"

Spirit Prompts Ecstatic Prayer, Aramaic/Translation: Rom. 8:15, Mk. 14:36

7 So through God you (sing.) are no longer a **slave** but a **son**,

// daughter

and if a son then an **heir**.

Intimate Knowledge Of God Already, Therefore No Law Added!

Freed From Rudimentary Principles Of Law: Circumcision, Diet, Calendar

Gentiles Experience *Stoicheia* In Idolatry To Non-Gods, Jews Under The Law

Christ Is Son By Nature, Jews & Gentiles By Adoption

B. vv.8-11 MAINTAINING THE FREEDOM GOD HAS GIVEN US.

Giving Up The Freedom Of The Faith Is Always A Possibility! No Add-Ons!

1) v.8 Past Bondage To No God Beings.

Benighted Condition Of Pagans In Their Idolatry!

8 Formerly, when you did not know God,

Before/After Thinking

you were in **bondage** (*edouleusate* = enslaved)

to **beings that by nature are no gods**;

Behind Idols Are Demons, Jer. 10:25, Ps. 79:6, I Thess. 4:5, 2 Thess. 1:8

Fallen Angels, "to gods that are no gods at all," 1 Cor. 8-10

2) v.9a Present Reality: To Know God (Active Voice).

9 but now, that you have come to know God,

Knowing God Not Begin With Them, v.9b

2) v.9b Present Reality: To Be Known By God (Corrected By Passive Voice).

or rather to be known *by* God,

p.v., Limits Former Assertion, Preserves Divine Initiative Of Grace

Amos 3:2, Rom. 8:28-30, I Cor. 13:12

1') vv.9c-11 Future Return To Slavery?.

Question Sufficiency Of Faith In Christ By Adding Religious Stuff

how can you turn back again to the **weak and beggarly elemental spirits**.

Turn = Reconvert In Wrong Direction

Is. 46:3-5, Rebuke, Cosmic Powers

whose **slaves** (*douleuein*) you want to be once more?

Why Return To The Familiarity Of Bondage?

10 You observe days, and month, and seasons, and years!

Nature Religion? Jewish Calendar Practices?

11 I am afraid that I have labored over you in vain.

1 Cor. 4:12, Phil. 2:16 //4:20, Real Possibility? I Cor. 15:1-5

MUST-A-BEEN THE RIGHT TIME

“But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son....”

At the right moment, God pulled back the curtain and showed up!

GALATIANS 4:4

I know something about each of you, me included! Something beyond conscious control that visits us with shame and pain, frustrates our dreams, and wounds those we love. It blinds and drives and batters and erupts and stings and corrupts and cannot finally be hidden beneath any of the pleasant exteriors we create, and it’s name has three letters– capital *S*, capital *I*, capital *N*– a little word for one of our two big problems, the other being capital *E*, capital *V*, capital *I*, capital *L*. SIN and EVIL are the two big ones. We are bent out of shape and easily exploited.¹

Something’s wrong with our world and us in it, something mysterious. No human relation technique can fix it, no amount of education outsmart it, no amount of money or power protect you from it. If there is a solution, it must come from outside as a new possibility. It must come as a gift from God.

Even worse, there’s no place to hide because there’s no part of you that’s untouched. All of the self is infected and inflamed by this awful thing, this unwelcome visitor who sets up shop in every corner of life. We want to and can’t because the will is bent towards weakness; we act on our emotions and find them to be unreliable indicators of what’s real. The mind is darkened and prone to error, the heart a rebel in our own breast; and finally- and most cruelly of all- our flesh fails under the pressure of death, and the light of life is extinguished.²

¹ Our U.M. doctrinal statement is blunt and terse: “Article VII: Of Original or Birth Sin: Original sin standeth not in the following of Adam (as the Pelagians do vainly talk), but it is the corruption of the nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually” (*BOD 2012*: 65).

² Jacob Arminius, in his “A Letter Addressed to Hippolytus A. Collius” (*Works*, 2:700-701) has a catalog of infected capacities, “I confess that the *mind* of a natural and

Whatever it is- this alien power, this moral virus, this cancer in the soul, this spirit of rebellion- is universal and one hundred percent deadly. *Sin* is our companion all our days; it's one dimension of what's wrong with the world, with us and everything we touch. It not just doing wrong stuff God said not to do in the Ten Commandments, the basic *thou-shall-nots*; that's transgression, *sin* with a small *s*, a symptom of the underlying condition of alienation from God. This *Sin* thing is more than isolated human actions; it's a pervasive power that precedes anything we do or think. We are born in bondage, behind the gates of an ancient prison camp and not- as we fantasize in our national myths- in the land of the free and home of the brave. Our infants look so innocent we almost believe it's so, but then they grow up to be just like us- living contradictions with knots in their hearts. Before ever the first symptom appears, before ever the first conscious act of cooperation with this contrary power is carried out, the reality is already present, not just in our world but in us. It's not just that we occasionally do bad things as a minority report in an otherwise admirable life and could stop if only we tried harder. No, that's naive. It's that we're all so mixed, so contradictory at every level. Not as bad as we might be- though some of history's major monsters seem close, because if that was so, life could not go on.

On the other hand, innocence surprises us with delight; joy erupts in unlikely places; meaning and hope shine through the cracks, and underneath the accumulated crud is a deep goodness and beauty that cannot be denied or defaced, an enduring echo and memory of Eden. It's not all bad in our world; much of the deep goodness of creation remains as a stabilizer, but our situation is bad enough and consistent enough to call for careful reflection, and that's what the biblical tradition has been doing for three thousand years- naming and exploring the issue of what's wrong with us and our world. After all, how is it that we- who bear God's image and were made for life in a lush garden with everything provided- now find ourselves so far from home and with such competing impulses tugging at our insides? The name given to the power that distorts us at every possible turn is *Sin*- from a Greek word that means *to miss the mark*, as with an arrow that refuses to fly straight. Sin is not just bad actions but a fearsome power that was released into all creation when we believed the lie that God was holding out on the best, and with it came *Death*, the sure sign that we have been cut off from the life of God, like cut flowers that soon wilt. A doubt was planted that led to distrust, distrust to rebellion, and with rebellion came the

carnal man is obscure and dark, that his *affections* are corrupt and inordinate, that his *will* is stubborn and disobedient, and that the *man himself* is dead in sins" (ital. ad.).

awful power of Sin to blind us to and separate us from God.³ Three things you can know about every person:

- 1) They have inherent dignity because they are made in the image and likeness of the Creator; underneath the crud is something beautiful.
- 2) They have the same moral infection as you which scars and distorts the divine image and leads to all manner of troubles. We all resist the same foe, some with more resources and success than others, which is why the problem of Sin and not the pain of it is evenly distributed.
- 3) Christ Jesus has come to identify with them, forgive them, liberate them, teach them his ways, and bring them back to his Father. His initial coming among us to launch the mission is what Christmas is all about.

What is- the sheer wonder of creation, *What happened to our Paradise-* the tragedy of the Fall, *What God did about it-* the Great Rescue: these are the three acts of the great drama, and it is the job of the church not just to share the good news of a cure but to make clear the diagnosis that makes the divine therapy necessary. And it can't be a shallow understanding; it must be a problem equal to the solution God provided: first the coming, then the life, then the unjust, cruel death, then the glorious resurrection of Jesus the Son, his ascension and promised return as ruler. What's wrong is that our relationship with the Living God has been ruptured by Sin and with the aid of outside agitation. We are now orphaned, set adrift..

But it gets worse because there's another layer of complexity— a normally invisible layer that's referenced in the first phrase of our first baptismal vow, “Do you reject *the spiritual forces of wickedness...*”⁴ The effects of Sin are everywhere felt and seen— in our hearts and in our cultures, but the next layer is not so easily tracked and mapped. There is an inborn corruption within the citadel of the self- *Sin with a capital S*, which is the prior condition that leads to *sins* with a *little s*, our rotten actions. But there are also spiritual forces outside the self that delight in our misery and who conspire to keep us looking in the wrong direction for help. And here a leap of imagination is required for many modern people who don't believe in anything we

³ Genesis 3.

⁴ “The Baptismal Covenant I,” *U.M. Hymnal*: 34.

can't measure and directly analyze.⁵ We have a visible Sin problem, and we have an invisible angelic problem. We are not the only intelligent beings in the world that have participated in the Great Rebellion, though we are the only intelligent beings made in the divine image and likeness.⁶

Creation is not just flat and one dimensional but richly layered, and one of the layers above us— to use a spatial analogy— is the angelic realm, and here has come a division of a different kind than ours. We're all caught in the web of sin and death, not so the angels. Some have fallen; others have not and remain faithful.⁷ We see this in the fact that after Jesus' forty days of temptation by Satan, the good angels came and ministered to him like a corner-man in a heavyweight bout.⁸ Some are our sworn enemies— the devil and his underlings, others our faithful friends. Satan and Gabriel- though once of the same order- are now opposed. So there are good angels who remain so, but no human beings who remain purely good and innocent. Our situation is grave and complex: we are weakened and internally divided by Sin's power, and we and our world and all its systems are a cosmic spiritual battlefield. If you picture a wounded warrior facing visible and invisible enemies on a battleground from which there is no retreat, you have a picture of what life looks like when viewed through the lens of robust biblical faith. Not pretty is it? No wonder people look for a happier and less threatening alternative in pop-psychology and endless distractions. But this is the church's vision of the human situation as drawn from Jesus, and at some point you make a decision: Was he right about the deep structures of life and its problems, or was he wrong? Were his encounters with the Evil One and his underlings part of an erroneous, pre-modern and now bypassed world view, or are they an insight into what goes on beneath the surface of life and behind appearances? Jesus was on the battlefield every day till the day he voluntarily laid down his armaments and surrendered his life to humiliation and torture and death. Jesus is God the Son become vulnerable. A crying infant, an innocent crucified man.

⁵ The classic article remains Paul Hiebert, "The Flaw Of The Excluded Middle," available at <http://hiebertglobalcenter.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/29.-1999.-The-Flaw-of-the-Excluded-Middle.pdf>.

⁶ See S.F. Noll, "Angels," in Ralph Martin & Peter Davids, *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 1997), 44-48.

⁷ On Satan and spirits, see Martin & Davids, *Dictionary*, 1077-1082, 1117-1123.

⁸ Matthew 4:11.

Galatians 4:1-11 7

Three times in eleven verses Paul refers to this hostile angelic layer that envelopes us like an atmosphere. Speaking of life before Christ, and of the possibility of returning to that bondage, he writes:

Verse 3, "... we were slaves to *the elemental spirits of the universe.*"⁹

Verse 8, "... you were in bondage to *beings that are by nature no gods.*"

Verse 9, "... how can you turn back again to the *weak and beggardly elemental spirits*, whose slaves you want to be once more?"

Apart from God's help in Jesus Christ, we are in bondage to the corrupting power of Sin as aided and abetted by our angelic opponents who delight in remaining hidden. We are not so free as we think or imagine; four times Paul says that outside Christ we are enslaved.¹⁰ We are sick with a disease we cannot cure- Sin; we are held captive by forces we cannot see but whose pressure we feel. Working hard- as we do and must- to solve things at a human level through education and programs of relief is important and a mark of the divine nature, but it's not enough, precisely because there is a visible sin layer and an invisible, angelic component that no merely secular or good-will mindset can address. The problems we see cannot be fixed with the resources at hand, and the most flawed of all resources is us. Wherever we go, sin and the possibility of evil goes with us. Marriages fail, nations fall, churches falter, colleges once raised up by Methodists to train Christian thinkers in all fields have now abandoned their roots and gone secular.

Now if everyone on the face of the earth was fed and clothed, sheltered and healthy and loved for a single day, and if death stopped its ruthless march for twenty-four hours, what a glorious thing it would be- a glimmer of God's kingdom, but the very second the window closed, it would all begin to fall apart again because our overlords would reassert themselves with ever-new strategies. And if you have a

⁹ On the meaning of this disputed phrase, *elemental spirits of the universe*, see Clinton Arnold, "Returning To The Domain Of The Powers: *Stoicheia* As Evil Spirits in Galatians 4:3, 9," *Novum Testamentum* XXXVII, 1, 1996, 55-76; also Richard Hayes commentary on Galatians in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume XI* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2000), 282-283.

¹⁰ vv. 1, 3, 8, 9c.

better analysis, something a bit more positive and modern that offers a better explanation for why we and our world are the way we are and gives people real hope, I'd love to hear it. I haven't yet found an alternative with equal explanatory power. I happen to believe the church got it right when it used the biblical language of *sin* and *evil* to name two strands of the cord that binds us so tightly. This is why we lay out a map of reality using both words in the first baptismal vow, "On behalf of the whole church, I ask you: Do you renounce *the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?*"¹¹ Not one layer of resistance but at least two, and each must be tickled out for an accurate map of where we live and why so much is wrong in the human neighborhood! So that you have may a story to link these complex thoughts, consider the confession of Pastor Matt Woodly:

"When I was about ten, my dad received a special gift from one of his patients: a beautiful globe. It spun on its base and played one of his favorite songs. He proudly demonstrated how it worked: grab it by the base, slowly wind it counter-clockwise, then release it, letting it spin clockwise while playing the music. 'You can touch it,' he said, 'but don't wind it, because you might break it.'

A week later, when dad was at work, I brought the globe to my room. Although I heard my dad say, 'Don't wind it up,' I decided to wind it up anyway. I gave a little twist and let it play. It played, but only for five seconds. So I gave it another twist and another and five more twists and then, *snap!* The globe separated from the base. I desperately tried to fix it, forcing the two pieces together. I tried gluing it. I tried taping it. As I stared hopelessly at the two pieces of the globe, I realized it was broken beyond repair. So I went into my closet, shut the door, and hid. It was Genesis 3 all over again."

Woodly then concludes:

"Our world is the broken globe: it's been twisted too far, and we can't put it back together. Relationships break, our sexuality breaks, we're slowly breaking the Earth. Our hearts break, nations break down and go to war, our health breaks, our politics break. All the glue, tape, and

¹¹ *U.M. Hymnal*, 34.

positive thinking can't put it back together again.”¹²

This is our sad tale; this is our global blues song; this is the long groan and moan of history; this is our tough reality and constant battle; this is why we need divine rescue followed by the support of divine grace. No one with the problem can fix the problem; help must come from outside. A hero of perfect purity must appear among us, as in the deep hope hidden in legends and myths around the world. And if you don't understand what the church teaches about why things are as they are, you'll miss why we think Jesus and Christmas are so important. It and he are the breakthrough for tortured planet earth and the beginning of the end of our long misery. The diagnosis is grave, but the cure is more than equal because it comes from the heart of God. Our hero and liberator has already appeared, and not only do we have his official story in four biographies, his Spirit is with us still as a living link to the world above. We remain- for all our struggles as a church- under the influence of the risen Jesus, living behind enemy lines as a minority report that this world still belongs to the God who's made costly personal arrangements to take it all back.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

Now to make a case for what God has done in Jesus Christ, Paul starts in verse 1 with an analogy from the upper end of social arrangements of his world. A few in that day were wealthy with estates; most were poor and many were slaves. A first son was the designated heir of the estate. Should he live and the estate be preserved, it was as good as his; a little lord he was, a future man of wealth and substance, but between the legal arrangements and the actual possession of the same were many years. Because he was a minor, his training and daily supervision was given over to a specialized slave who might be much more educated than the boy's own father, particularly if taken in battle from another country. He was- in Greek- the *paidagogos* (lit. *the one who leads the child around*, in English a *pedagogue*- a teacher, tutor and trainer). Part scholar, part chaperone, part drill sergeant, part tormentor if the regimen decided by the father was harsh. Though a first son with a coming inheritance, for a season he was- in fact- *a slave under a slave*. A son who is a slave sounds like a contradiction, but not if the slavery is temporary. At some future point- in some cases are early as fourteen and others as late as twenty-five, he

¹² Edited from PreachingToday.com search under *Original Sin*.

would enter the full benefits of sonship and inheritance.¹³ At the right time he goes from being *under a slave* to being *over an estate* and *over the one who was once over him!* This is the world Paul invokes. It's an arrangement his hearers understood without explanation, verses 1 and 2: "I mean that an heir, as long as he is a child, is no better than a slave, though he is lord of all the estate; but is under guardians and trustees until the date set by his Father." They got it.

So while the analogy is imperfect, it's adequate for Paul's purpose of presenting the larger realities of present bondage and future freedom. Some ancient pedagogues were more benevolent, but ours is the harshest of all. Before coming to faith in Christ, the human situation is as described in verse 3, and note that Paul includes himself in the plural *we*: "So with us, when we were children, we were slaves to *the elemental spirits of the universe.*" We, says Paul, pushed about by powers hostile to God: this is the universal human situation outside Christ. Everyone is under the cruel management of powers not committed to their welfare who make life harder than it has to be and who tell us this is all we can hope for. Their desire is to make us appease them and to steal the attention that rightly belongs to God.¹⁴ Contrary to modern thought, there is no neutral zone in which to stand, no independent ground of human autonomy from which to operate as a moral free agent. Everyone has a master, and it is Jesus Christ, or it is some less benevolent power who delights in remaining hidden so as to work in the dark. It was clear to the church since at least the second century that all Gentiles who came to Christ from paganism needed extensive and repeated spiritual detox. Unlike the Jews, who knew the true God and had his law, all Gentiles were assumed to be spiritually compromised.¹⁵

"So, Pastor Phil, you clearly believe people are basically bad."

"No, just that we need more sophisticated categories than simply *good* or *bad.*"

"What do you mean, and don't confuse with all that fancy preacher talk!"

"Well, all that God has made is good, including us. The Book of Genesis calls us not only good but *very good*, and original goodness is not obliterated by sin, though it is spoiled and bent out shape. Our spiritual health has been infected and debilitated, our connection with God broken. We function, but at a much lower level,

¹³ Hayes, *Galatians*, 281-282.

¹⁴ Mt. 4:9 // Lk. 4:7.

¹⁵ www.ccel.org/s/schaff/encyc/encyc09/htm/iv.vii.clxiii.htm

and with many more problems.”

“Pastor, I think I get it, but can you paint me a picture?”

“Well, let me give it a try. It’s like taking a can of Krylon to a museum masterpiece. The beautiful becomes ugly in a hurry. Nothing about us works as it should; we’re an eight cylinder engine running on four cylinders; we’re a soybean field full of pig weed, a guitar with strings missing. There’s something wrong within us, an inborn resistance to God that shows up in behavior. And when you add that forces hostile to God are our deceivers and tormentors, you see what desperate shape we’re in. So two things must be said. The goodness is still there, but now covered by a layer of crud; and secondly, all of us are capable of great betrayal and collusion with genuine evil.”

“Sounds like my life,” my friend smiled.

“Mine too,” I said. “The simple labels of good or bad don’t do justice to the complexity. Good remains in everyone- even the worst; sin is present in everyone- even the best; and evil is always prowling around waiting for an opportunity to take advantage of our weaknesses and fears and draw us into real wickedness.¹⁶ We are- each of us- a never ending battleground, not some of the time but all of the time.¹⁷ Just monitor your thoughts for thirty minutes and tell me what you find. So if you tell me someone is a good person, I must answer, ‘Yes, but if we knew the whole story....’” And if you say they’re a bad person, I will say, “Yes, but that is not all they are....” The human equation- as best I can figure it- is this: created goodness + inherited and actual sin + the constant threat of real evil + our inevitable death + the constant offer of God’s grace = our common condition. So to use simple categories of *good* or *bad* is not sufficient because they cover most of the complexity.

“So what has God done about the mess? Why didn’t God intervene earlier?”

“Good questions. So big was the mess and so patient is God about working with whatever is at hand, there first had to be a long period of preparation. So God called Abraham and created his own people- the Jews- as a kind of living laboratory for a new way of believing and living. The Jews are God’s minority report in history. God then allowed there to come into being a universal culture around the Mediterranean basin. Think Alexander the Great. A common language: Greek, a

¹⁶ 1 Peter 5:8.

¹⁷ Galatians 5:17.

common government and laws: the Roman army and empire, an infrastructure of communication and travel: Roman roads, protected sea lanes and postal routes.

Demographers estimate that around 105 billion humans have been born across time, with only about 2 percent of those in the 100,000 years before Jesus' birth, meaning 98 percent of all who've ever lived were born after his birth, after he came. "If he'd come earlier in human history, how reliable would the records of his relationship with man be? But he (Jesus) showed up just before the exponential explosion in the world's population."¹⁸ This is what Paul means in verse 4, "But when the time had fully come, when on God's timetable everything was in place- not in a perfect world but in a prepared world, then God acted. God the Son entered history at ground level as Jesus, born of a woman named Mary who was a Jew." Much had to be in place for the life of Jesus to be so carefully remembered and recorded using the form of an ancient biography, and Paul's confession is that the timing was perfect.

My friend looked bewildered, "I had no idea it was this involved."

"Yes it is. What the Jews knew was that their God was one and holy and a revealed mystery. What they did not yet know- because it had not yet been revealed- was that there is an inner, personal complexity to God, what we Christian name *The Holy Trinity*. To comprehend what God did in Jesus, new concepts are required, and Paul was one of the best at wrapping new language around God's actions:

"But when the time had fully come- when the Jewish people and their scriptures were present, when times were hard enough to make them long for a Messiah, when the infrastructure of language and law and communications and travel was in place so the message could spread rapidly, and just before an explosion in world population, it was then- at just the right time- that God the Father and God the Spirit sent God the Son into history on a grand rescue mission. Fully human, *born of a woman* like every other child. A Jew, *born under the law*. First to offer freedom to his own people, *to redeem and rescue those who were under the law*, then to open the way back into the Father's house to all the rest of us, *so that we* - and here Paul is speaking to a Gentile congregation-

¹⁸ Dinesh D'Souza, "An Absentee God," *Town Hall*, July 28, 2008, townhall.com/columnists/dineshdsouza/2008/07/21/an_absentee_god; also William Lane Craig, "Where Was God" podcast, <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/where-was-god>.

might receive adoption as sons (and daughters). In Jesus God has come to defeat the bullies and reclaim us as his kids.”

God the Son, now with the name Jesus, has come to free us from the weight of sin, the sting of evil, the grip of death, and welcome us back into the Father’s house. This is what Christmas is all about. The fancy word is *incarnation*, God the Son assuming our flesh without ceasing to be who he was so that we could go from being battered orphans to full adoptees with all the privileges of family, including an inheritance. And to make it stick in the memory of his hearers- most of whom could not read, Paul put it in a little creed in verses 4 and 5, a creed about the right time and the right one and the right mother and the right people and a new hope for an old world, “But when the time had fully come- when history was ripe, God sent forth his Son: born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive adoption as sons.” Here’s what Philip Yancey says:

“How did Christmas feel to God? Imagine for a moment becoming a baby again: giving up language and muscle coordination, and the ability to eat solid food and control your bladder. God as a fetus! Or imagine yourself becoming a sea slug, that analogy is probably closer. On that day in Bethlehem, the Maker-Of-All-That-Is took form as a helpless, dependant newborn.”¹⁹

But the baby grew up and became a man, left home to assume his destiny, was baptized by John as a public identification with us all. He called disciples, displayed the kingdom in word and deed, made his final confrontation with inadequate religion and violent government one Friday in Jerusalem where they rid the world of the dreamer and troublemaker by nailing him naked to a roadside cross where he writhed in agony and finally breathed his last with a great shout. But the God who arranged a virginal conception has more surprises up his sleeve, the best of which- and the trump card against all tyrants- is resurrection from the dead. How do you control a man who won’t stay dead and who comes back with amazing new powers? So a once-dead and now marvelously re-embodied Jesus comes back with new life and breathes his own Spirit into his followers. The communications link that was with him is now in them so his work will now continue through them. That’s us!

For me to go from being an alienated orphan to a beloved child is a change in

¹⁹ *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 106

status, a legal change, a formal adoption. But there's also an inward, experiential component to knowing God. And to this Paul makes his appeal in verses 6 and 7, "And because you are (now) sons and daughters, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" This God, this great Creator, has come in Jesus to show divine love and rescue us now and forever, and when I see this I am restored, I am home, I am safe no matter what comes. I belong in my Father's house and to my Father's heart as a beloved son or daughter. It takes a lifetime to live into this new identity. In his book *Invitation to a Journey*, Robert Mulholland tells the story of a woman who was the result of an unwanted pregnancy:

"Her mother was a prostitute, she the accidental byproduct of her mother's occupation. Her pilgrimage brought her to faith in Christ, blessed her with a Christian husband and beautiful children, a life of love and stability, but she was obsessed with the need to find who her father was. It was affecting her marriage, her family, her life.

One day she was standing at the sink washing the dishes, tears of anguish running down her face, 'Oh, God, *who* is my father?'"

She then heard a voice, 'I am your father.' So real she turned to see who'd come into the kitchen, but there was no one there. Again it came, 'I am your father, and I have always been your father.'

In that moment she knew the profound reality of which Paul speaks. She came to know that deeper than the 'accident' of her conception was the eternal purpose of a loving God...."²⁰

What God has done in history, God is willing to validate through experience so that we *get it down deep*. My big brother Jesus has brought me home; he invites me to learn his language of trust and prayer. *Abba* was the Aramic word he called Joseph as a child, which later opened up into a much larger reality; *Father* was the Greek translation for Paul's hearers. In Christ I have a new status as a son, a new Spirit within me that cries out, new freedoms to explore, a new life to live, a new family to belong to, new things to learn, but I still live in an old world. My interior reality has changed, my environment has not. It's as gnarled and hostile as ever.

I have changed, but nothing around me has changed, which is what Paul addresses in his second paragraph in verses 8 through 11. New battle lines have been

²⁰ Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 1993, 35-36.

drawn. So now that you free in Christ, don't go back to the old ways.²¹ Better the uncertainties of the new freedoms than the familiarity of the old bondages. So he asks, "Now that God knows you and you know God, how can you turn back to the weak and beggardly and despicable elemental spirits whose slaves you want to be once more?" Don't let your history determine your future; live free in Christ! Live as God's child, not as a slave of the powers.

Danny Villegas did a strange thing. He walked inside a Federal Credit Union and told the teller he was robbing her, then added, "You might as well call the police right now."

Ten years before, Danny robbed a bank in Fresno and was sentenced to 70 months in Club Fed. Turns out, he liked prison so much he committed another crime, just so he could return! After announcing the robbery, Danny sat down on a couch in the lobby and waited for the police. Lt. Ron Wright of the South Daytona Police said Villegas worked in construction in Texas for five years, but grew tired of the work. "Apparently," said Wright, "he robbed a bank in California, spend 70 months in a jail in Phoenix, and enjoyed his time there."²²

Our good and beautiful world is presently a painful wreck of a place, and it will not fundamentally change till God calls a halt and sends the kingdom down from above to change it all forever.²³ Until then, no one is immune to the virus of sin and its fevers, the reality of evil and its horrors, and the finality of death. But an outsider has come inside our world to blaze a new trail and show us the way and be the way. His name is Jesus, and he wants you back in the Father's house, learning the Father's ways. So don't go back to the old life. Learn to live free in Christ. Celebrate Christmas every day!

²¹ For a new book on helping struggling Christians find freedom, see Charles H. Kraft, *Two Hours to Freedom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen, 2010).

²² PreachingToday.com search under Galatians 4:1-11.

²³ Revelation 21-22.
