

GALATIANS 4:4, 5 CHRISTMAS ACCORDING TO PAUL

“When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”¹

Irreligious individuals occasionally and foolishly charge that there never was a birth of the Christ. Such individuals appear united in denying the miraculous events that are outlined in the Word of God. Such thoughtless individuals may not necessarily deny that there actually lived during that particular era a man known as Jesus of Nazareth, but they assume that Luke and Matthew invented and/or created Christian myths in an attempt to enhance His stature. Some of these scoffers are willing to concede that there may have been a teacher of some local repute who gave rise to these legends, but they doubt that he was any greater than any other religious leader.

Perhaps the strongest argument unbelievers present in support of their infidelity is the assertion that no other writers of Scripture appear to make mention of the miraculous birth. These infidels display their ignorance of Holy Writ through exposing their folly. Multiplied texts speak of the birth of the Son of God. During this holy season I have already presented the testimony of prominent witnesses, including Isaiah, the prophet of royal birth, and John, the beloved disciple. Today I appeal to the Apostle to the Gentiles. The Apostle was certainly aware of the birth of Jesus who is the Christ. Moreover, he was aware of the significance of that birth as is evident from even a casual perusal of his letters. Focus on one of his earliest letters as we learn of Christmas according to Paul.

CHRIST THE SON OF GOD WAS BORN AT A DEFINITE TIME. “When the fullness of time had come...” These glorious words show that the entry point of the Christian message is at the same time the turning point of history. Even our system of dating confesses this truth. It is now **2013 AD—anno Domini, THE YEAR OF OUR LORD**. Apart from the words which are penned here, life offers no future, no hope. We are left without hope and without God in the world if this is not **2013 THE YEAR OF OUR LORD**. But God has intervened in a way which brings effective and complete salvation—hope to the hopeless and help to the helpless. That is the Christmas message.

What do you suppose is meant by the Apostle’s phrase, “When the fullness of time had come?” The Greek word translated **fullness of time** means exactly that. The thought conveyed is **fulfilment**, especially as related to time. Even a casual acquaintance with the ancient world reveals something of the significance of the Spirit's Word through the Apostle. Christ was born during the era identified as enjoying *Pax Romana*. This is that period of time when the rule of one government insured world-wide peace. Peace imposed by conquering armies had extended over most of the civilised earth making travel and commerce possible in a way previously unrealised. Great roads linked the empire of the Caesars, ensuring free and uninterrupted communications with the furthest outposts of civilisation and providing rapid access to all corners of the empire.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

An even greater factor unifying the diverse regions of the empire was the all-pervasive language and culture of the Greeks. Greek was the *lingua franca* of the empire, being readily understood and read throughout the whole Mediterranean world. Not only linguistically, but also culturally, the ancient world was dominated by the prior educational advances of the Greeks. Therefore, politically, culturally and linguistically the world was unified—conditions which ensured a rapid spread of the Good News declaring the salvation of Christ the Lord.

Religiously, that ancient world was sunk in a moral abyss so deep that even pagans cried out against it. Spiritual hunger was everywhere evident as witnessed by the prevalent appeal within every social stratum for spiritual insight from religions introduced from the east. Those religions in apparent ascendancy within the empire were exactly those ancient religions which had once been confronted by the prophets of God when the Hebrew peoples first entered the Promised Land. The philosophers contributed in a negative sort of way, casting doubt on the old pagan systems of religion as they looked for some sort of unifying power behind all the polytheistic systems which had previously prevailed. The Jews themselves had made preparation for the coming of the Christ through the preaching of monotheism in some one hundred fifty synagogues located throughout the empire, and by their anticipation of a Messiah who would right the world's wrongs. That human longing for communion with God, that spiritual restlessness which pervaded all mankind insured a receptive audience once Christ was come. These religious longings insured that for the entire world, the time had indeed fully come.

Theologically, several significant factors ensured that the time had fully come. Just as a father in that ancient culture would determine the time his child became a son, so that heavenly Father chose the time when the world was to pass from its childhood under legal supervision to a period of spiritual sonship. In other words, God chose the time of transition from one dispensation to the next. The events surrounding the earthly ministry of the Christ marked the transition from the dispensation of the law to the dispensation of grace. Daniel had clearly prophesied that the exact time of Messiah's advent could be calculated from the issuing of the Persian decree to rebuild Jerusalem [DANIEL 9:25]. The Messiah was to come during the era of the fourth Gentile empire [DANIEL 2:31-45; 7:1-14]. First, Babylon, then Persia, followed by Greece and finally, Rome, had successively ruled over the land of Israel. The Magi clearly recognised the significance of the era in which they lived, understanding that the time had fully come; but Jewish religious leaders were ignorant of those same times.

As example of the inability of Jewish religious leaders to recognise the times, consider the following incidents drawn from the pages of the New Testament. The first relates an incident which occurred when the Pharisees and Sadducees approached Jesus asking that He show them a sign. Superficially, these religious leaders appear to be honest, but the Master, looking inward to their hearts, sees only wickedness. They appear to seek confirmation of what they knew to be true, but they are dishonest. "The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, 'When it is evening, you say, "It will be fair weather, for the sky is red." And in the morning, "It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening." You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.' So he left them and departed" [MATTHEW 16:1-4].

Here is another incident when Jesus addressed the blindness of religious leaders. “When [Jesus] drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, ‘Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation’” [LUKE 19:41-44].

Paul recognised that the religious elite of the world was also spiritually ignorant. “Among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” [1 CORINTHIANS 2:6-8].

THE BIRTH OF CHRIST THE SON OF GOD WAS A DETERMINED ACT, according to the Apostle, for God sent His Son. The verb the Apostle employed in this verse is significant. *Exapéstēilen* [from *exapostéllō*] refers to someone who is “sent out from.” More particularly, the word refers to someone dispatched as an authoritative representative charged with a specific task. In fact, we would not be out of line to translate this clause, “*God sent His Son on a mission.*”

Throughout the Scriptures we read that God sent His Son—and that act was considered and deliberate rather than capricious and serendipitous. What glorious verses the Apostle John has penned in his first epistle. “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins... We have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world” [1 JOHN 4:9, 10, 14].

Jesus our Master acknowledged repeatedly that He was sent into the world by the deliberate decision of the Father. Listen to a few of those instances. “I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak.” “Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me.” “Now I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’” [JOHN 12:49; 14:24; 16:5].

Here are several instances recorded during His High Priestly prayer when Jesus testified that He was sent by the Father. Note the precision with which the Master spoke. “This is eternal life, that [My disciples] know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

“I have given [My disciples] the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

“As you sent me into the world, so I have sent [My disciples] into the world.”

He predicates His own mission on which the Father sent Him as a model for the mission of those whom He would send. The disciples of the Master are to model their life and ministry after His own life and ministry; disciples are to accept the commission to go into the world that others may know of the salvation provided in Christ the Lord.

In this prayer, there is yet another extended testimony that the Master's recognised that He was sent. Listen to His confession before the Father. "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me" [JOHN 17:3, 8, 18, 21- 25].

Even as He issued His commission, Jesus testified that He had been sent by the Father to fulfil a specific mission. "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you" [JOHN 20:21].

I have frequently taught that our Master's advent was planned from before the creation of the world. Though we accept this truth by faith, finite minds struggle to understand what it means. The teaching admits of no time before which God did not have in mind to send His Son for the sake of man. We have grasped the essence of the Good News if we can but approach the thrill of this truth—throughout eternity, from before the foundation of the world, God has been committed to sending His Son.

Assuredly, it is not inconsequential to note the submission demonstrated in this act. God the Father sent and God the Son obeyed. Never are we more like Christ than when we demonstrate a submissive spirit. However odious such submission may seem in today's world, it is precisely such a submissive spirit that Christ modelled for His disciples. It is because we have refused to recognise this truth, substituting our own wicked ideas instead, that we suffer in the churches, in our homes, in society.

Churches suffer as otherwise good people become dictatorial or ignore the Word. When the membership fails to submit to God's will and Word, jostling to exert power over others, churches are crippled and hindered in their service for Christ. Homes suffer as husbands abuse their positions of responsibility and as wives rebel against the headship of their husbands and as children reject parental responsibility for their welfare. Nations are in constant turmoil as citizens demonstrate rebellious attitudes, reject constituted authority and institute new and novel forms of tyranny. What do you suppose would happen should each of us learn the repeated truths of the Word of God? Would there not result harmony and peace on an unprecedented scale throughout our nation?

The apostolic command to "submit[] to one another out of reverence for Christ" [EPHESIANS 5:21], teaches us that we are responsible to honour Christ through serving one another and refusing to compete for power over our fellow believers. Paul is here speaking about Christ and the church [see EPHESIANS 5:32b].

When the Apostle does speak of husbands and wives, it is to establish that God does intend the home to operate with man as the head of the home. "I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God" [1 CORINTHIANS 11:3]. If God is the head of Christ, is it demeaning to say that women are to recognise her husband's headship in the home? Does such acknowledgement permit abuse by men any more than saying that the head of every man is Christ? Only a wicked heart would attempt to distort God's teaching!

Is it demeaning to insist that we are to submit to government—even an arrogant government—in light of the Word of God? “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” [ROMANS 13:1].

Jesus recognised that civil authority resided in what God permitted. He faced Pilate and boldly stated, “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above” [JOHN 19:11a].

THE BIRTH OF CHRIST THE SON OF GOD WAS BY DELIBERATE MEANS. Twice the apostle emphasises this truth. He writes of Christ that He was “born of a woman.” Again, he teaches that Jesus was “born under law.” These two phrases cannot be separated from one another and still make sense. Clearly, Paul refers to Christ's full humanity with this first term, “**woman born**,” or “born out of woman.” That this is included in the same sentence as His identification as the Son of God would indicate that Paul intended to speak of this Jesus as the unique God-man—at once fully God and fully man. Surely, we must conclude that Paul was fully cognisant of the virgin birth and that this is his intended reference here. We know that Paul travelled for a long time in the company of Luke. Luke wrote the third Gospel—the Gospel account that bears his name. We could not believe anything other than that the Apostle was aware of the birth narratives that Luke included in chapters one and two of his Gospel.

Paul's use of this particular phrase [born out of woman] corresponds with the promise presented in **GENESIS 3:15**:

“I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel.”

The Seed of the Woman was promised to crush the serpent's head. No doubt the Apostle had also in mind the promise found in **ISAIAH 7:14** concerning the birth of Immanuel.

“The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” Whatever else may have been in his mind, Paul here makes explicit reference to the virgin birth of the Son of God. Of that we may be certain.

That second phrase, “born under the law,” is problematic for some people. There is no article found in either of the phrases, and if the first points us automatically to the virgin birth of our Saviour, it should be no great surprise that the second points us just as quickly to His birth under the Law of Moses. Some have opined that the term points only to His humanity, thus emphasising His human nature. They reason that all men are under *nónom* of some kind; hence, the reference is simply a statement of the Master's humanity. That such is wrong is evident from considering the verse which follows. The Son of God was born “to redeem those who were under the law.” In this verse, we see that that law in view is the same one which enslaved men and necessitated redemption.

All are under law and therefore all alike are condemned. Read again those stunning words found in **ROMANS 3:10-20**, pausing to reflect on the application of the final two verses in the context of this verse.

“None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands;
no one seeks for God.
All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one.”
“Their throat is an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive.”
“The venom of asps is under their lips.”
“Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”
“Their feet are swift to shed blood;
in their paths are ruin and misery,
and the way of peace they have not known.”
“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

“Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”

All alike are under law, and therefore all alike are condemned. The significance of that statement is seen in verses preceding and following our text. Listen to the Word. “All who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’ But the law is not of faith, rather ‘The one who does them shall live by them.’ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’” [GALATIANS 3:10-13].

Again, the Apostle has written, “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” [GALATIANS 4:4, 5].

If you contend that these verses have no immediate application to us as Gentiles, I simply refer you to Paul's teaching found in **ROMANS 2:12-16**. “All who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.”

Moral law—whether codified in textual form such as is found in the Pentateuch, or residing in the conscience—condemns us as sinners. Focused on our evil condition, we are quickly convinced that we cannot live lives free of greed, free of lust, free of hatred, free of lies—and we know that all such attitudes are contrary both to divine law and to natural law. That understanding, together with the certainty that we must give an account to the Righteous Judge of all mankind, condemns us in our own minds.

Paul uses this last phrase, referring to Christ's birth under the Law of Moses, to emphasise that **THE BIRTH OF CHRIST THE SON OF GOD WAS FOR A DISTINCT PURPOSE**. This is revealed in **verse five**. "When the fullness of time had come (as we have seen), God sent forth His Son (on a specific mission), born of a woman, born under law (as has been explored), to redeem those who were under law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." Regardless of what law may have been discussed earlier, the Mosaic Law is here included, as we have revealed God's distinct purpose in all this divine activity.

In **GALATIANS 3:13**, we were said to have been redeemed from "the curse of the law." The concept presented in **verse five** is bolder still, for we are said to be redeemed from the law itself. The law is presented in this instance as a system of self-justification. Hence, the law can never attain its purported goal since man is incapable of justifying himself. In **GALATIANS 3:26-29** our position as sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus was affirmed. Then, shifting the imagery to our past universal, ubiquitous experience, Paul vividly reminds us of our past enslavement by the basic principles of the world [**GALATIANS 4:3**].

This reminder led him to present the two verses which have served as our text. From those verses, we have learned that the birth of Christ, at a *definite time*, was a *determined act* accomplished by *deliberate means* to effect a *distinct purpose*. That distinct purpose was that we who are the believers addressed in this letter, might be redeemed, and that having been bought out of the marketplace, we might then receive the full rights as sons.

Several words may enrich our insight into apostolic theology. First, Paul spoke of the purpose of Christ's coming being *to redeem*. That word, *exagorázō*, means quite literally "*to purchase from the marketplace*." The agora was the marketplace and the preposition *ex* means "*from out of*." There is at the least the suggestion of competitive bidding for the souls of men. In His death, Christ provided an infinite sacrifice which constitutes an infinite redemptive price. Therefore, we read the statement of the apostle that Christ is the Saviour of all men, though this is practically true only for those who believe [see **1 TIMOTHY 4:10**; and also the more chilling **2 PETER 2:1**]. That concept of a successful competitive bid is strengthened perhaps by the apostle's choice of the word translated receive. That word may certainly mean "*to receive again*" and convey the sense of "*to get back*." We must not become dogmatic about this issue; nevertheless, it is an interesting possibility.

The Apostle's intention is clearly to inform us that by Christ's redemption we have been accorded the full rights of sons—we have attained the status of sons. In the day in which Paul wrote, Roman families made a distinction between a child and a son. A child might live in the home and even be informally acknowledged by the father. But the child was under the tutelage of a schoolmaster who bore responsibility for the child's preparation to advance in familial status. At the father's discretion, the child, who had no rights whatsoever, was one day formally and legally acknowledged as heir to the father. The child was then said to be adopted, to have been accorded the full rights of a son or to have attained the status of a son. That is the word used here—a legal term which is used in the New Testament only in a religious sense. Christ, by His redemption, insured that we are not merely children of God, but that we have been accorded full rights. This is a most significant development for each of us who share in this great family.

By faith we become “children of God” (*tékna theou*) as outlined in **JOHN 1:12**. However, a regenerated sinner becomes a son of God by adoption [cf. **GALATIANS 4:5**]. In the natural world, a child is still immature and must grow into adulthood. Whereas in the material world a child does not enjoy mature responsibilities and privileges until reaching a predetermined age, in the spiritual realm a regenerated child is immediately placed in the position of sonship, enjoying all the privileges and responsibilities of sonship.

The noun which is translated “adoption” in **GALATIANS 4:5** (*huiiothesían*) means “*to be placed in the position of a son.*” That act of adoption, receiving the full rights of sons, was determined by God in eternity past and has been finalised by the work of the Holy Spirit at the point of conversion. Christ came “to redeem those who were under law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” [**GALATIANS 4:5**]. A child who was under the tutelage of the schoolmaster of law could never be regarded as a son. What a rich heritage we would sacrifice were we to insist on gender neutral language! What a sacrifice we are asked to make to political correctness!

The adoption as sons emphasises that those to whom Paul is writing are in his estimate mature. Though they may not necessarily have acted in a mature manner, (actually they were acting in quite an immature fashion), they were nevertheless even then heirs of the full rights of sons of God. You need not wait until some date far in the future to enjoy the adoption as sons; this is your present position through faith in Christ. At the point you become a child of God, you receive the adoption as a son. Even now you enjoy access into the presence of the Father, you enjoy the presence of His Holy Spirit, you hold unique spiritual gifts which He has distributed just as He decided, you have the promise of Heaven and all that God has planned for His precious sons.

Don’t get hung up on the issue of gender, don’t be insulted by the God’s choice of words. Gender is not the focus; focus on the fact that you no longer require a baby-sitter because you have entered into your full right as a son of God. Before Him, you are already a recipient of all that He has promised. This is not to say that the Law no longer has any application in your life, but it does mean that it can no longer condemn you. The Law need no longer imprison you or destroy you. Whenever the wicked one comes to you pointing to your failure to keep the Law you need but remind yourself that you are no longer under the Law but under grace and that you have received the adoption as a son. If you permit yourself again to be condemned by the Law you are permitting yourself to be hogtied, and your life in Christ becomes a pitiful anachronism.

Receiving the adoption as a son of God has nothing to do either with natural descent or with human effort. It is through faith that you have received this inheritance. We enter this new relationship with God through faith. We become children of God through faith in God just as John says in his Gospel. “To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,” [**JOHN 1:12**]. Similarly, we receive our inheritance as sons of God through faith. We are not slaves, labouring to achieve freedom; we are sons of God enjoying our freedom.

Whatever else you may imagine Paul meant with this text, it is obvious that Christ is central to the Christian’s right to access to the Father. Christ is at the heart of the Christian’s salvation and service; Christ is the centre of all that the Christian is or does. The Apostle, however, uses this point to make the transition to the confession which each Christian will have made in baptism. The baptism will not have saved one as a son of God, but because he is saved, a son of God will have been baptised.

The evidence that all this has been accomplished is the residence of God's Holy Spirit, the Spirit of His Son, in our hearts. We come eagerly into the presence of God; we actually long to be in His presence. We are no longer comfortable with the accoutrements of this world alone; we confess our desire to know the Father. In short, that Spirit living within us prompts us to cry out, Abba, Father [VERSE SIX]. The summary statement is provided in VERSE SEVEN, where we are said to have gone from slave to son and from son to heir. What more can God do than this He has done?

This, then, is Christmas according to Paul. The Season is a time of joy and should be a time of increased confidence for Christians. It is a time of hope and renewed strength for us as members of God's Family. And though the world celebrates in the only way the world can celebrate—focusing on self, we who are heirs of Christ commemorate His advent through telling others of what He has done that they also might share in this great gift. Who have you told? Who knows because of your witness?

And that is our invitation to you who yet stand apart from us as believers in the Son of God. In standing apart from us, you identify yourself as arrayed against God. We invite you to cease your rebellion, to believe the Good News of Christ, and to enter into the benefits of redemption—the adoption as sons. To you who are sons of God who now enjoy the adoption as sons, what keeps you apart from openly confessing this truth through obedience to Him beginning with baptism? You who have yet to unite with this church are called to employ openly your full rights as sons through investing your life with us in this church. Come, join this Body of Christ today. May God be glorified as He works in each of our hearts. Amen.