

Make This Christmas Count **“Make a Difference”**

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Digging Deeper

Make This Christmas Count: “Make a Difference”

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Text(s): Luke 2:19, 51; Galatians 3:23-4:7; Matthew 5:14-16

Introduction to the New Series

Within the Christian story is the idea that the future need not resemble the past or the present, and that idea we describe with the word “hope.” Our present reality requires a sharp break with old habits and accustomed conduct. This does not mean change for change sake, but the acceptance of our persons as growing and maturing selves with a destiny that lies beyond the mundane trifles of a monotonous existence. The “being” of the world continues to reveal the mysteries of the God who ever interrupts the flow of time with bursts of His presence. Thomas Kelly, the Irish hymn writer, concluded his grand hymn “Praise the Savior Ye Who Know Him” with this rich stanza”

*Then we shall be where we would be;
Then we shall be what we should be;
Things which are not now, nor could be,
Then shall be our own.*

Kelly gazed into the Christian life as it would one day be known in God’s hopeful future. He imagined throughout this hymn a life lived in the present that was shaped by the possibilities of the future. Our “end” must be formed by our “beginnings” here in this life.

In a word, the Advent season offers insights into the sort of characters we can become as Christians — character that ultimately “makes a difference.” Advent, culminating in the great Christ-mass, creates environments that further the end of God’s purposes by proposing beginnings draw from the narrative of the infancy story found in the Gospels. Characters and a plot unfold there which point the way forward. We pivot during Advent, driven by the mystery that in Jesus God became human and lived among us (John 1:14; 1 Timothy 3:16). The key players in the Advent drama each reveal the necessity of being persons who move with the pivots of revelation from the Lord of heaven who chooses to work through us to make a difference on earth. So it is we pray the Prayer of our Lord, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). Each of us has a role to enact in God’s Big Story. Advent opens up sacred spaces to learn our lines, master the stagecraft, and perform the story that continues to challenge the prevailing stories of the dominant culture around us.

To set as our narrative, “Make a Difference This Christmas,” requires careful attention to the characters of the original Advent, and to the history-changing which their words and actions made possible. Consider Joseph betrothed to Mary, suddenly confronted with a dark possibility: this baby in Mary’s womb isn’t mine. Consider Mary the teenage bride-to-be given an offer from the angel to bear the Son of God by allowing the Holy Spirit to impregnate her. Consider the shepherds living on the margins of cultured society and entrusted with the message of good tidings and great joy. Consider the magi foreigners from the mysterious East chasing constellations to divine the birthplace of a newborn king among the Jews. Consider aged Elizabeth kinsmen of Mary called by her own unexpected pregnancy to offer counsel to her younger relative. Consider paranoid Herod who must face the possibility of regime change from an upstart Messiah. Consider the Emperor Caesar Augustus whose census decree unknowingly brought the baby Jesus to Bethlehem.

Each of these players in the divine drama of Advent faced choices that would commit them to long-term consequences for themselves and for Jesus, ultimately for you and me. Some of them acted in complete ignorance of the reasons or the outcomes or of Jesus. The Lord of heaven, Yahweh the God of the Jews,

purposed the restoration of His sin-sick world through a profound entry into the body of a Nazarene woman name Mary. God wanted to make a difference in the world he created, using the media of human lives in order to affect human lives. He became human so that humans might become His children. No small venture. What God was about to do in human history would determine who He would be, then and forever. The God of Israel would do something in Jesus that forever mattered to Himself.

It might seem overly heroic for anyone to venture such things. But then, God is the agent of large and important ventures accompanied by risks for the human race He had put in charge of His world. In relationship with the actors of the Advent story, the Lord of heaven entered into a new covenant with the human race to achieve for them and with them something that would count for the long-term. Echoing the old oracle from the prophet Jeremiah, God would accomplish a future without precedent:

¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. {14 Or will restore your fortunes} I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile" (Jeremiah 29:11-14).

What Yahweh would do for Israel and the world would make a difference in what they hoped for, how they prayed, who God would be for them, and where they would live during and after their long exile in Babylon. Even though the exile ended in 539 BCE, Jews considered themselves to be still aliens “among the nations” until the coming of salvation “on the last day.” The Advent story is a watershed moment, considered by Christians to launch the beginning of a new age with the arrival of Jesus the Messiah, Lord of Israel and Savior of the world. His coming marked the in-breaking of God’s kingdom, where God would reign through His Son.

To the extent that the Advent people — Mary, Joseph, etc. — received the promise in faith, they partnered with the King of heaven to make a difference on earth. There were no “bit-players” in this drama, but all made a difference in their unique ways. By observing their faithfulness, we receive from their example the promise applied to our own hearts and lives, shaping our habits during Advent that will make difference throughout the coming year. In our Advent series, climaxing with Christmas Eve, we consider several themes that guide us to a *Christmas that Counts*. We ...

- Make a Difference
- Make Space
- Make Peace
- Make Known
- Make Certain

Introduction to this Week’s Topic: Make a Difference

A few brief comments about descriptions. The word “Christmas” is a contracted term from the longer “Christ Mass,” referring to the worship celebration held in churches. When was Christmas first celebrated? In an old list of Roman bishops, compiled in 354 CE these words appear for 336 CE: "25 Dec.: natus Christus in Betleem Judeae." “December 25th, Christ born in Bethlehem, Judea.” This day, December 25, 336, is the first recorded celebration of Christmas. Until then, little notice appears in the extant literature that the birthday of Jesus held an esteemed place in regular seasonal worship. Frankly, birthdays for ordinary people did not hold the same significance as they do for us. The reasons were economic, societal, and religious. Emperors of the Rome were celebrated on their birthdays. However, the church father Origen (185-254 CE) believed imitation of such feasts by Christians for Jesus’ birth was inappropriate, drawing as they did their example from a pagan ruler.

However,

Clement of Alexandria (150-215) favored May 20 but noted that others had argued for April 18, April 19, and May 28. Hippolytus (170-236) championed January 2. November 17, November 20, and March 25 all had backers as well. A Latin treatise written around 243 pegged March 21, because that was believed to be the date on which God created the sun. Polycarp (69-155) had followed the same line of reasoning to conclude that Christ's birth and baptism most likely occurred on Wednesday, because the sun was created on the fourth day.

The eventual choice of December 25, made perhaps as early as 273, reflects a convergence of Origen's concern about pagan gods and the church's identification of God's son with the celestial sun. December 25 already hosted two other related festivals: *natalis solis invicti* (the Roman "birth of the unconquered sun"), and the birthday of Mithras, the Iranian "Sun of Righteousness" whose worship was popular with Roman soldiers. The winter solstice, another celebration of the sun, fell just a few days earlier. Seeing that pagans were already exalting deities with some parallels to the true deity, church leaders decided to commandeer the date and introduce a new festival.¹

Since Jesus was declared to be the "Son of God" and the reflection of bright and shining glory now become human, the connection to the "Sun" seemed natural. Thus,

The pagan origins of the Christmas date, as well as pagan origins for many Christmas customs (gift-giving and merrymaking from Roman Saturnalia; greenery, lights, and charity from the Roman New Year; Yule logs and various foods from Teutonic feasts), have always fueled arguments against the holiday. "It's just paganism wrapped with a Christian bow," naysayers argue. But while kowtowing to worldliness must always be a concern for Christians, the church has generally viewed efforts to reshape culture—including holidays—positively. As a theologian asserted in 320, "We hold this day holy, not like the pagans because of the birth of the sun, but because of him who made it."²

Churches throughout the world, as Christianity grew, commonly met for special worship on Christmas day, joyfully singing with carols, reading the nativity story, and considering the needs of the poor through generous gifts. And so the Christ Mass (or communal service) became firmly fixed in the church's liturgy. Only later did the secularization of the day accompany the outcome of the Enlightenment.

Leading up to the Christmas celebration on December 25th is the period known as *Advent*, an extended series of weeks, punctuated by Sundays in Advent. In 2017 that season begins with Sunday, December 3 and ends with Christmas Eve, December 24. Each week generally carries an assigned set of readings with themes preparing the Christian community for the climactic Christ Mass on December 25th. From this brief discussion we can see that Advent is not Christmas, but is the journey taken by the faithful on the way to Christmas. Advent is sometimes called the Nativity *Fast*, while Christmas is the Nativity *Feast*. Another term is *Christmastide* which extends for twelve days from Christmas Eve to January 6, the date of the Feast of *Epiphany*. This last term refers to the celebration of the Magi's visit to the Christ child and the sending of light to the nations of the world. Epiphany has profound missional significance for the church and is an appropriate transition to the church's work on behalf of Christ for the whole world — the Gospel for the nations.

Each of these celebrations in connection with Christ's birth emerged from the practices of the church over several centuries. Nothing in the Bible requires them or even suggests their appearance. Yet, the joy brought by Christ's birth brings a spiritual inertia into the life of God's new people. Joy cannot be contained in old wineskins, and so the overflow of the Christian Gospel finds helpful expression in new practices that shape worship. That process of renewal continues into our own day. We are, after all, convinced that the coming of Jesus in the womb of Mary dramatically changed the course of history, leading to the material alteration of the timeline by which we date events as "before" and "after" that birth. History bisects with the birth of God's Son.

Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, masterfully describes the difference Jesus made by his birth:

What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. ² He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. ³ So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. ⁴ But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, ⁵ to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. ⁶ Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, {6 Aramaic for Father} Father." ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir (Galatians 4:1-7).

Jesus makes Christmas count through an act of liberation whereby slaves become free persons. "Born of a woman" — that is, born of Mary — Jesus accepted the yoke of the Law so that he might "redeem" — set free

¹ Elesha Coffman, "Why December 25?" *Christian History* (August 2008).

² *Ibid.*

by the paying of a price. Christmas means that becoming human cost God something, cost Jesus something. God, by becoming human, chooses to be known by the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth, whatever the cost that decision entails for God. Having made the Son of God a human being, God releases human beings from the slavery of sin and declares them to be “sons” and “heirs” instead. Father and Son together send the Spirit of their shared love into the hearts of his earthly creations who may now declare with joy “Father!” Inside this new relationship is the promise for the future where human beings may inherit the blessings of God’s new creation. And so, we say with joy, by sending His Son, God has made a difference in every human life who welcomes his arrival. Yes, Christmas makes a difference, and during Advent we have the privilege the walk a journey in which we, too, make a difference. This mattered to God and so it counts much for us.

Scripture Readings:

(See each section below, with the relevant texts printed out)

Profiles that Make a Difference

In the Bible, it’s always about people not just ideas. So much of the biblical text is shaped by stories of people who witnessed to the presence of God in their lives. They testified by word and action to the difference God made for them, and then, through them for the world. Advent is no exception. Two of the four Gospels have accounts of Advent and Christmas, of the journey *toward* and of the arrival *from*, of preparation *for* and of presence *with*. I am taking the liberty to incorporate a helpful list from the Pastor Wangler’s planning notes for this series.

1. The Magi made a difference with their gifts and worship:

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and *they bowed down and worshiped him*. Then they opened their treasures and *presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh* (Matthew 2:10-11).

2. The Shepherds made a difference with their testimony

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." ¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ... ²⁰ *The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told* (Luke 2:15-20).

3. Joseph made a difference with his obedience

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" -- which means, "God with us." ²⁴ *When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.* ²⁵ But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus (Matthew 1:18-25).

4. Mary made a difference with her faithful “yes” to God

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For nothing is impossible with God." ³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. *"May it be to me as you have said."* Then the angel left her (Luke 1:34-38).

5. Elizabeth made a difference with her encouragement

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ *But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?* ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" (Luke 1:41-46).

6. Zechariah made a difference with his song

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: ⁶⁸ *"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.* ⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of

his servant David ⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), ⁷¹ salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us-- ⁷² to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath he swore to our father Abraham: ⁷⁴ to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. ⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, ⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven ⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace." ⁸⁰ And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel (Luke 1:67-80).

7. An *unnamed* innkeeper made a difference with his barn/cave

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn (Luke 2:6-7).

Mary and Her Treasures

We could spend a whole study on each of the characters who made a difference during the first Advent and Christmas. Perhaps the reader would benefit from simple meditation on the text provided above. We'd like to focus on the central role of Mary for this week's study. She was, after all, the one person with the most to gain or lose. As noted above, she needed to say "Yes" to the invitation of the angel. Elizabeth reminded Mary,

Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" (Luke 1:46).

Indeed, the response of Mary to the angel implied that kind of costly faith:

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "*May it be to me as you have said.*" Then the angel left her (Luke 1:38).

The truth is that Mary entered the arena of her crucial role in this drama with a host of questions, summarized by her asking, "How shall these things be?" What the angel proposed to her simply made no earthly sense, and if it turned out to be true would mean enormous cost to her public reputation. She might well have said to the angel, "Do you have any idea what you are asking me to do, what this will mean for me and my family?" Mary gestured toward the prevailing culture of honor and shame woven into the fabric of Jewish life of the time. A pregnant unmarried woman with a wild story about the Holy Spirit impregnating her would not be readily believed! From the moment of Jesus' conception, he would "bear the shame," ending with death on a cross to taunts of derision.

Mary would become "the mother of sorrows." In the words of another figure in the Christmas story, namely, Simeon in the Temple:

³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵ so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:34-35).

The soul of Mary would be a pierced soul, a wounded soul, a mother's sorrowful soul. Oh, yes, Simeon "blessed" Mary, Joseph, and Jesus that day, but his would be a *mixed blessing*. Mary occupied the middle place, the instrument of God's salvation for the world and would thereby stand in the line of fire for a world that would not easily understand or accept her role or the account she would give about the conception and birth of Jesus. Mary had much explaining to do. That was not an easy task for so young a woman as Mary. Who is adequate for these things, Paul would later remark about the costliness of obeying the Gospel: "Who is equal to such a task?" (2 Corinthians 2:16).

Did Mary have any idea what she had just decided by saying "I am the Lord's servant ... Let it be ..." (Luke 1:38)? In the Greek text of Luke's account, he uses a verb form for the phrase "May it be to me" that is somewhat rare in the New Testament. It is the optative mood, a grammatical form that implies a "wistfulness, hopefulness" that does not yet rise to complete confidence. It comes close to saying "If only it would be so!" Mary's willingness to obey the Lord's will comes with an awareness that this will not happen without incident, if at all. That is why she would later need the encouragement of Elizabeth her kinsman from Judea to shore up her acceptance of Jesus into her body. Using this Greek mood, Luke places emphasis on the trusting tentativeness of Mary's faith. After all, she's never done this before. It's all new to her. Come to think of it, it's all new to the shared history of the whole human race! Mary steps into the void of an untrodden road without map or compass except the visionary word of the angel and the seasoned faith of Elizabeth. But she strikes out with acceptance in the form of a prayer, wistfully petitioning, "May it be to be..."

Mary strikes out on the journey of Advent because doing so counts in the bigger picture of God's purposes for the world. She strikes out because doing so will, in the words of the angel and of Elizabeth, make a difference. Jesus, born from her body, will be the Savior of Israel and hope for the world. Although Mary decided to obey before she knew what she was doing when she did so, yet her journey began in prayer. None of us undertakes the "impossible" without prayer. This was surely the impossible for Mary, even before she had a full grasp of the biology involved. It had almost nothing to do with biology, but with theology and with the appearance in human persons of the God who until now was invisible to the world. Mary would become *theotokos*, the God-bearer, "the mother of God." Did she have any idea what that meant before she said, "Let it be..."? Clearly she did not, while taking the next steps anyway.

Christ would be formed in Mary's body. God would spend nine months in the womb of a virgin. And this is Israel's God! — the God who can have no material image! What could Mary do in response to such a prospect? She did the only she could do. On two subsequent occasions, Luke breaks open the secrecy of Mary's heart with a twice-spoken observation:

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart (Luke 2:19, 51).

Knowing full well that she was inadequate to comprehend the words of the angel, Mary treats them as rich and precious treasures whose value would only be known over time. In the vault of her heart, she stores up those words that dripped with promise and terror, hope and harassment, profoundness and perplexity. What else could she do? In time that decision to treasure the unfathomable would yield a trove of blessing wrapped in the swaddling clothes of a baby she called Jesus. Perhaps she recalled the words of the ancient poet:

I *treasure* your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you (Psalm 119:11, NRS)

Traditionally this psalm has been translated "I *hide* your word ..." but the underlying Hebrew *tzāpan* means to "treasure" in a cherished place, reserving for a future time. One day the word Mary treasured would make a difference, and she chose to secure it safely in her heart until the right time came. One day the miracle of the divine child would be revealed to the world, and Mary would know that she had made a difference.

When Paul wrote about Jesus coming "in the fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4), he followed up that hopeful development with a reminder that the Jesus who was once formed in the body of Mary must also be formed in us:

My dear children, ... I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you (Galatians 4:19).

The Difference Freedom through the Son Makes

²³ Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. ²⁴ So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. ²⁶ You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. ^{NIV} Galatians 4:1 What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. ² He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. ³ So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. ⁴ But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, ⁵ to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. ⁶ Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir (Galatians 3:23-4:7).

The early followers of Jesus knew that the world he entered through his Advent was by no means *free*. Roman law restrained dissent and punished the zealot who protested. Crosses awaited revolutionaries (*lestes*) who dared to question the dominant forms of imperial justice. Nobody voted for Caesar, yet Caesar ruled. Jews also had a law, the Torah, which was God's gift to His ancient people. And yet in the hands of the religious teachers, Torah turned into a weapon to keep the people in line. They chafed under the harness of Rome and Jerusalem. In a larger sense they were a people still in chains to an exile without God's king in charge, only Caesar, only Herod, only Pilate.

But restraint wasn't the only discouraging reality. In a deeper sense, in spite of a temple system designed to deal with Israel's sins, people throughout the land groaned under the imprisonment of guilt without forgiveness. Yes, they had sacrifices intended to deal with sin, but in daily life the incarceration of the Jewish soul remained an ever-present truth. Who would set them free? Many hoped for the Messiah, whether a military leader or a righteous teacher or a new-born king. Saul of Tarsus was one of them, a man schooled in Torah and motivated by the desire to make the world right again. He was a devout Pharisee, part of a movement that gestured toward the renewal of all Israel through faithful obedience to Torah. Then one day a fresh reality broke into his life through a vision of none other than the risen Jesus. Soon, using his Roman name "Paul," he would carry a freedom-producing message the ends of the Roman Empire, the Good News that "for freedom Christ has set us free."

From Paul's letter to the Galatians (excerpted briefly in our *Introduction*) comes a message about *freedom* that makes a difference in human life. You are encouraged to read the text above. In what follows, we comment on this important text. From the pen of Paul come words of freedom, the fruits of Advent and the truth about Christmas. They are reflections on what happened because God's Son "was made from a woman" — made from Mary.

1. The language of "imprisonment" in Galatians 3 may strike us as unusual, especially since Law seems to be the subject and Israel the object! In 3:22 the word is *sunekleisen* which means to "lock up or close up together". F.F. Bruce offers this insight: "...the written law is the official who locks the law-breaker up in the prisonhouse of which sin is the jailor" (p.180). That's a good thing, since we can't have sinners running around without a check on their actions and the consequences. Keeping law-breakers in prison gives them ample time to think about what they have done wrong, and start thinking about how things could be different. And, says Paul, that's what actually happens: Jesus Christ comes to the prisonhouse and proclaims liberty to the captives. Those who believe his message, whoever they are, Jew or Gentile, receive the promise by faith in Jesus Christ.
2. Again, Paul tackles the same issue from a slightly different angle. "Before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed". In this case, the "detention" language includes the notion of the "guard" (Greek: *ephrouroumetha* from *phroureō* which means "to guard or protect"). In this case, the role of Law is protective in anticipation that "faith is coming" (Greek has *mellousan pistin*, "the about to be faith", where the verb is present tense, implying that faith was already "one the way"). This passage speaks to the clear intention of God all along. Torah was not some afterthought or simply an impediment to the full functioning of Abraham's covenant. Far from it. Faith was "on the way" from the very beginning, and Law's role was to keep Israel safe until faith was fully revealed (Greek: *apokalupthēnai*, the common word for "to reveal", literally, "to uncover the head"). Faith was God's destination for Israel and for the world.
3. The figure shifts slightly again, comparing the Law to a child's guardian, the *paidagōgos*, who walked him to and from his home, keeping him safe along the way. But the "guardian", hired by the child's father, was also the teacher of the child. By his instruction, the child learned not only about the world, but also about how to live in the world. The *paidagōgos* remained deeply involved with the child's life, watching his every move, observing his development, keeping him from trouble, and reporting periodically to his parents about his progress. Clearly, this figure is much gentler than the previous ones, pointing out the true nature of Torah. In Hebrew the word *torah* means to teach, guide or instruct. Its function was to keep Israel within the boundaries of God's purpose, much like a child was guided by his *paidagōgos* until such a time as he reached adulthood.

We must notice how "age" fits into this figure of speech. There comes a time when the child no longer needs the guardian. If the guardian has done his job properly, the child-turned-adult will not longer need to be "under the guardian". Did this mean the guardian and the child ceased to be in contact? Did the child become hostile to the guardian now that he became an adult? Hardly. Often, according to ancient accounts, guardians retained a loving and warm relationship, until the guardian became an old man and died. Torah

does not cease to play a role in the life of Christ follower, but its role has changed and the way it is applied to a Christ follower's life is quite different from its application to Israel while "under the law". We are no longer "under a guardian". And for good reason: we are no longer "a child". Christ has come, he who is the "mature adult" has arrived and we are "in him". We have outgrown Torah because we have grown into Christ. Whatever relationship we have with Torah will be a dramatically altered one. Paul now explains why.

Then in Galatians 3:26-29 is Paul's summary analysis of what has happened to change our relationship with the Law. Most importantly, we are now "in Christ Jesus", that is, we are united as the people of God in the Messiah who has come. The guardian has released us *into the family of God* which has been created by the Messiah's death and resurrection. The word Paul uses for "sons" is not the same word as we would find for the child who is under the guidance of the guardian. The word translated "sons" is *huioi* which refers to a person who has reached his majority, that is, has come of age in a fully legal sense. Faith is the proper attitude of a person who has attained this age of maturity. While a person is still a "child" they must "obey" and conform to the will of the guardian. But now, the child, as an adult, bears a new relationship with the other adults in his world. They encounter each other more as peers than as subordinates. What evidence does Paul offer of this changed relationship to God and to one another, now that Christ has come?

Paul identifies that change in the initiation rite. As a Jew, every baby boy was circumcised in order to establish early in life his identity as a Jew, part of Abraham's family and part of the Jewish family. This set him apart from the rest of the world and preserved in his flesh his identity as one of God's chosen people. That is what the Law required, and rightly so. But all of that has now changed. Paul speaks instead of "being baptized into Christ", followed by the "putting on" of Christ. Now Jewish people certainly knew about all kinds of "baptisms" or "dippings", which is what the Greek word *baptizō* actually means. John, the cousin of Jesus, practiced baptisms to call the nation to repentance before the coming of Messiah. Gentiles would undergo proselyte baptism as part of the process to become a Jew, climaxing with circumcision. But when Christ followers practiced baptism it was different. Paul speaks about "as many of you as were baptized", pointing to the widely applied practice of baptism *for Gentiles who did not complete the proselyte process which ended with circumcision*. When baptism took place, the candidate would be placed into the water in the name of the Triune God (see Matthew 28:19-20). *After they came up out of the water they were given a new, white garment, symbolizing the fact that Christ had become their life, the outer expression of their inner faith expressed in their baptism.* They had, symbolically, "put on Christ".

But that is not all. When circumcision was the authorized rite of initiation, only males could participate since females lacked the necessary anatomy to fulfill the requirement (Note: Jews did not practice the horrific modern practice in some cultures of female circumcision). Male heads of household and their male offspring could undergo the rite and in so doing represent the whole household, wives and daughters. Curiously, baptism lacked this restriction. *As the official Christian rite of initiation into the Christ community, baptism could be experienced by anyone who received the Gospel by faith.* To that point, Paul now speaks in 3:28:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

This passage gets to the heart of Paul ongoing argument about who gets to be included among the people of God, and on what basis Gentiles can be included along with Jews. Now that "faith has come", because the Messiah has come, Torah no longer shuts out anyone from being fully participating members of the Christ community. In God's purposes, Jew and Gentile have reached adulthood, ready to receive the promise made to Abraham and his *single family*. Notice, that Paul refuses to allow for many families, some included and some excluded. There is no exclusion based on Jew or Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female. Instead, the family is "one in Christ" (Greek: *heis este en Christō Iēsou*). The word for "one" is the same word we have followed throughout this section: one "seed" (or family); "one mediator"; "one God", and now "one in Christ". If that is true, then the Galatian Christians, who are Gentiles, do not need to do anything more to be accepted within the family of God. God's covenant with Abraham promised blessing to the Gentiles through the formation of a

single family. The old distinctions between Jew and Gentile which had, up until Christ came, served well to preserve Jewish national identity, having fulfilled their purpose and reached their goal in Christ.

Therefore, Paul can say to the Galatians, "Stop letting the agitators fool you any more. Stopped being affected by their 'evil eye'. The promises of God made to Abraham have always anticipated the day when Gentiles would be included along with Abraham's natural descendents in the single family of God. You, Galatians have already been counted as part of that family, as evidenced by the way you were baptized. You rose from the waters of baptism filled with the hope of new life, clothed in the garments of Christ, and fully accepted by God."

Now we come to Galatians 4:1-7. The opening words, translated here as "I mean", come from the Greek *legō de*, indicating that Paul intends to offer a fresh explanation for the position he advocated in the previous sections. "Let me explain it this way" captures the sense, as he undertakes an analogy somewhat different from 3:22-26, though it shares some of the common threads about inheritance and sonship. Our lives, Paul argued there, were in some sense "protected" or "guarded" before we came to Christ. "Law" kept us in check *until* such time as Christ came to do his work and end the curse of law. In the present passage (4:1-7), the metaphor shifts to "the heir" (Greek: *klērounomos*, a son who would one day receive his father's estate). Paul contrasts the "potential privileges" of the "child" (Greek: *nēpios*) with the "actual ones" of the "son" (Greek: *huios*). The infant has not yet "come of age", but protected and restricted, making him appear to be no different than a *doulos*, a "slave". In this, Paul notes, there is an irony: for the "not-yet-come-of-age-child" is, in fact, "lord of all things" (Greek: *kurios pantōn ōn*). The language suggest that the "child" is, "all along" (the present active participle *ōn*, "being"), "lord of all things". We would say, he's not yet "his own man". Legally, the estate belongs to him; practically he is entirely unable (by virtue of his immaturity) to manage it.

What does "the heir" require if he is to arrive safely at the age of adulthood and enjoy the benefits of managing his father's estate? Help. Help from two classes of people. They were put in charge by the child's father *until* some date specified by the father in his "will" (=covenant). Roman law recognized the ages of fourteen and twenty four as transitions for the child on his way to his "majority", and each phase was guided by a different responsible adult. Paul's distinctions do not necessarily conform to this process, but he uses different Greek nouns in each case:

1. *epitropoi*, "guardians". Those who took personal charge for the child.
2. *oikonomoi*, "stewards (trustees)". Those who cared for the father's property in the interest of the child.

Scholars have discovered a papyrus document dating from the early second century C.E. which illustrates aspects of this process:

"If I die before the Horus and Eudaemon have completed twenty years, their brother Thonis and their maternal grandfather Harpaesis, also called Horus, son of Thonis, shall be guardian (*epitropos*) of each of them until he completes twenty years" [*Papyrus Oxyrinchus*, 491].

We are indebted to many of these papyri for a better understanding of legal and cultural practices at the time of Jesus and Paul, at least in the wider Graeco-Roman world. In this instance, we learn that fathers, in anticipation of their deaths, made arrangements for the care of their minor children until they reached the twentieth year. The Greek word used is the same as that which Paul uses in the first instance. And we also learn that the father "set a time", which Paul calls *tēs prothesmias tou patros*, for the release of the child from his *minority* into his *majority*; that is, when the child became a fully vested heir of his father *in fact* and not just *in hope*. Until the time of his adulthood, the child lived under a promise, but in order to assure the safe arrival of the child to his adulthood, others needed to surround him with rules, instructions, restrictions, and the like. Such persons often needed to act *in place of the child*, making decisions for him that he was unprepared to make.

At times, the child bristled under the such forms of adult control, not understanding the reasons, but at other times felt comforted by the care and protection. Paul wants the audience to have that picture planted firmly in their minds, thinking about all the lineaments of being a child-heir *before* the time appointed by the father. Such arrangements were contingent on the possibility of the father's death. It might well turn out that the father

would live right up to the time when a child might become fully vested. In that case, the father had any number of options at his disposal, including the voluntary dividing of his estate or the assignment of its management to his son(s). But if the father died, the necessity for the "guardians and stewards" was absolute, along with the necessary controls over the child's freedom until the time of adulthood had arrived.

Then, in 4:3, Paul takes this analogy and draws out its implications for the argument he makes to the Galatian Gentiles Christians. "In the same way" (Greek: *houtōs*) also "we" (*hēmeis*)... To whom does Paul refer by this first person plural pronoun? Is he talking about Jewish people, Gentiles, Jewish Christians, Gentile Christians, or a combination of these? Up to this point in his letter, he has used "we" to indicate the Jewish people and their history. Ordinarily, Paul starts his arguments of this kind with reference to the situation with his own people, the Jews, and then eventually extends the application to Gentiles as well. It seems to be that way in this passage. The Hebrew people were, Paul affirms, "children" (*nēpioi*, "infants", "children before their majority"), having been "enslaved" (Greek: *dedoulōmenoi*, a perfect participle, indicating the settled state of affairs in the past, leading right up to the recent present). As such, the Hebrews were "under the elementary principles of the world" (*hupo ta stoicheia tou kosmou*), a phrase containing the word *stoicheia*, a term with a variety of possible meanings. It appears in the New Testament in Hebrews 5:12 to indicate "basic principles", in the sense of "the ABC's". Education called such principles "the rudiments", the building blocks of knowledge learned at an early age in preparation for more advanced understanding as adults. We also find it used for the "physics" of the universe, the fundamental elements comprising all existing things: air, earth, fire and water being counted among the most common (Note: the Greek philosophers before Socrates, such as Thales, Anaximenes, Anaxagoras, Heraclitus and Pythagoras, all had theories about what these elements were, as well as their number). Peter seems to have this meaning in mind in 2 Peter 3:10, 12. Even the heavenly bodies (stars, sun, planets) were considered to be *stoicheia*, as were spirits who inhabited the world (see Colossians 2:8, 20 where Paul gives this word a distinctively Gentile meaning).

It is unlikely that Paul would have had the pagan definitions in mind if he applied this *stoicheia* slavery to the Hebrew people. For them, it was Torah that functioned as *stoicheia*, the ABC's of their early spiritual education. Paul's use of the term for "world" (*kosmos*) likely implies "this present age" under which the Hebrew nation lived until the arrival of the Messiah who brought the "age to come". The word *kosmos* ordinarily underscores the way the world is organized and ruled, the principles by which it is governed. The "Hebrew world" was run by the Torah, the legal instrument for the administration of law and justice. It was a necessary means to serve the interests of "the children of Israel" who were journeying toward the day of their majority when God would fulfill his promises and "give them the kingdom", as it were. Until the arrival of Jesus the Messiah, Israel had stumbled on its journey, not always submitting to the instruction of Yahweh. They were certainly rebel children but, more significantly in Paul's argument, they were "slaves".

But being a slave has powerful connotations within Judaism. It reminds the Jewish people about Egypt, Babylon and the exile. If they were still slaves, Israel was, in a real sense, still in exile. And Torah remained the guardian and steward. Far from setting Israel free, Torah, in this God-sanctioned role, kept Israel yet a child. In more recent times, Torah had become more of a burden than its original design intended. Those who administered the childhood of Israel, interpreted Torah in ways which made the slavery even more unbearable.

"But when came the fullness of the time" (4:1). Good News, children! *Advent* bears rich fruit! *Christmas* has come! Our celebration makes a difference for lives set free by the Gospel! You have reached your majority! In the Greek phrase *to plērōma tou chronou* we have the exact parallel to the idea of "time appointed by the father" already stated by Paul in the phrase *prothesmia tou patros*. "Fullness of time" simply means the time when the child's majority has been reached. Yet when Paul reveals *what happened* in the fullness of time, he does not begin with the Jewish people as such, but with the startling announcement that "God sent out His Son" (Greek: *exapesteilen ho theos ton hion autou*). A few comments are in order:

1. The initiative, as in the case of the father who writes his will, lies with the Father. God "sends out" His Son. He doesn't simply send Israel, the-child-become-the heir, but instead, God sends His Son. Paul uses the

noun *huios* which suggests the one who has in fact reached his majority. And of course that would be expected of the Messiah who comes "to fulfill the promises of God". The word "fullness" and the verb "to fulfill" share a common root form, and so Paul is free to use this word with both ideas in mind. "The Son" comes to represent all of Israel whom God wants to bring to their majority.

2. But to bring Israel to his majority meant to set Israel free, since prior to majority, the "child" functions like a slave. Jesus the Messiah comes as the liberating Son in whom the interests of Israel are summed up. Jesus the Messiah identifies with Israel in all of her situation, and, in turn, Israel is placed into Jesus the Messiah ("in Christ") with his *new identity*. How does Jesus identify with Israel?

a. "born out of a woman" (*genomenon ek gunaikos*). Does Paul have a literary allusion in mind by using this expression? Probably, and it would connect his remarks to Genesis 3:15 where God tells the fallen Adam and Eve about the coming "seed of the woman" who would crush the serpent's head. By using this reference, Paul places the whole account in a somewhat more cosmic and general context. He doesn't say, born from Abraham's line, but instead pushes the reference to origins all the way back to the beginning. If Jesus is "born out of a woman" then he shares a common humanity, not only with Jews, but also with Gentiles.

b. "born under law" (*genomenon hupo nomon*). Longenecker comments on this phrase:

...lays stress on another factor involved in the representative work of "the Son." For it was not just that Christ came as "the Man" but also that he came as "the Jew" under obligation to God's Torah, so fulfilling the requirements of the law in his life (cf. Matt 5:17-18) and bearing the law's curse in his death (cf. Gal 3:13; Phil 2:8) [p.171].

According to the Jewish rabbis, Israel lived under "the yoke of Torah" as expressed in its commandments and submission to the will of God. Israel was to see this "yoke" as a privilege not as a burden. Unfortunately, that's not how things stood when Jesus arrived, and he told his disciples to exchange that yoke for his own (Matthew 11:28-30). Jesus came to fully obey His Father as the representative of the human race, including Israel.

3. The purpose of God in sending His Son is next spelled out by Paul with two coordinate clauses each preceded by the Greek conjunction *hina*:

a. "in order that he might redeem the ones under law". The redemption was due, of course, to the "slavery" under which Israel found itself as a child before the time appointed by the Father for receiving the full inheritance. This slavery was, however, much broader than Israel, since Christ came as "born of woman", connected to the whole human race. However, Israel's redemption is in the foreground. The word for redemption, *exagorazō*, appropriately connects this with the Exodus in Hebrew history. Christ, in His coming as the "Son", sets Israel free much as God did when He brought Israel from Egypt, as celebrated in Passover by the offering of the lamb. A price was paid to release the captives. Friberg's *Lexicon* defines this as "liberating atonement". Galatians 3:13 already proclaimed that Christ redeemed from the "curse of the Torah" by becoming cursed "on our behalf". In his redeeming work, Jesus stood in the place of all Israel, thus opening up the way to full majority as sons of the covenant. By his death on the cross, Jesus put into force the terms of the new covenant with Israel, offering forgiveness of sins and deliverance from this present age, as expressed in the language of Paul's greeting in Galatians 1:4.

b. "in order that we might receive the *thuiiothesia* "adoption". The word translated "adoption" does not appear in the Greek version of the Old Testament, nor does it show up outside the writings of Paul in the New Testament. His usage includes the present sonship of Christian believers (Romans 8:15); the resurrection of our bodies (Romans 8:23); the status of Israel before God (Romans 9:4); the goal for Christian believers who are "in Christ" (Ephesians 1:5).

The idea of "adoption" belongs to the Roman system of law. Adoption as a concept within Torah is relatively unknown. However, F.F. Bruce points out:

If the son to be adopted was not yet of age, his original father conveyed him into the *potestas* [legal "power"] of his adoptive father by a pretended sale. Once adopted into the new family, the son was in all legal respects on a level with those born into that family. If the son to be adopted was of age, he was adopted by his new father in the ceremony of *adrogatio* ["questioning"], in which the pontifex maximus

["high priest"] and the augurs ["prophets, oracles"] were involved. It was also possible, later, for a testator to adopt some one in his will.

The Roman process of adoption required the presence of seven witnesses. Their testimony was crucial if, after the adoptive father's death, his "natural" heirs contested the validity of the adoption: the witnesses had to testify that a valid adoption had taken place in their presence. We may compare the twofold testimony confirming the divine adoption of believers in Rom. 8:15f [p.197-198].

Of special importance is the whole idea that Israel needed to be adopted at all. Was he not already a son? No, says Paul, only a child, awaiting his majority. But something has intervened that requires the sending of God's Son to attain the majority on Israel's behalf. Having fallen under the curse of law, as Paul argued in Galatians 3, Israel was "stuck" in his minority and could not get released on his own to become God's fully vested sons. The law, sin and death had Israel in their grasp, and something more was needed. He who was the true heir, Jesus Christ, contested the current slavery and got liberation from the old masters through the cross. So now, by a further act of the Father's will, following the death of Jesus, He raises Jesus from the dead who then assumes his role as the true Son and Heir. Christ becomes the "elder brother" who grants sonship on new terms, those of his death and resurrection, bringing Israel into a fully adopted state, wrenched from slavery and into sonship (see Hebrews 2:10-15).

Paul takes the conclusions he has spun from his analogy and applies them beyond the adoption of Israel. He continues in 3:6: "But because you are sons..." (*hoti de este huioi*) cleverly changing the "we" to "you" and thereby drawing the Gentile Christians into sonship alongside their Jewish counterparts. It is not merely a matter of Israel becoming sons, but the Gentiles becoming sons as well, and on the same basis: adoption. Even though natural Israel had been God's people, they forfeited their sonship more than once (see Hosea 1:9-10; 2:23; Romans 9:25-26 where God declares "you are not my people", but then later declares, "you are the sons of the living God" after He sends Jesus into the world). God has acted in a fresh way to restore sonship to both Jew and Gentile on the basis of Christ's redemptive work. Again, Paul envisions not *two people* but *one people of God*.

What evidence does God give that He has included Gentiles alongside Jews? It is the sending of the Spirit of His son into "our hearts" with the cry of fatherly recognition, as expressed in the Hebrew exclamation, *Abba*, that is, "Father". In Romans 8:15-17 the Spirit is called "the Spirit of sonship [adoption]". The sign of the Christian's new identity is the presence and witness of the Holy Spirit. A helpful parallel text is found in the book of *Acts* on the occasion when Peter brought the Gospel to the Gentile house of Cornelius, the Roman centurion. Listen to Luke's account and think about the connection with Paul's words here in *Galatians*:

While Peter was still speaking these words [i.e. preaching the Gospel], the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking with other languages and praising God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? *They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have* (Acts 10:44-47).

Note Peter's conclusion based on the evidence of the Holy Spirit: "*They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have*". Here is a realization that Jew and Gentile are together recipients of the Holy Spirit as the sign of God's choice of both of them as His people, as His sons. And baptism became the egalitarian sign that both were welcomed, male and female, slave and free, without any consideration of their circumcised state (see Galatians 3:26-28).

The Holy Spirit arriving in the human heart is the divine sign that a person has become a child of God. For that conclusion we also have the testimony of Paul in Romans 8:8: "And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ". Further, the center of human volition, thought and feeling is the heart; it is from the heart that the newly formed child of God cries out with words of affection and recognition to God: "Father!" This is the same word which marks the opening of Jesus' model prayer, "Our Father", and for the Gentiles in Paul's audience, the privilege to utter those words as sons alongside Israel's sons, was "joy unspeakable and full

of glory" (1 Peter 1:8). What Paul and the Galatians had once witnessed while he preached among them was the evidence of the Holy Spirit in their transformed lives full of affection for God and love for Paul. As one family of God they endured hardship together during those tumultuous days in the Galatian towns of Antioch, Lystra, Derbe, Perga, and Iconium. Paul the Jew welcomed into the one family of God, Gentiles, alongside himself, together forming the newly constituted people of God who were sons of God.

"No longer a slave, but a son and heir". Skillfully, Paul ties together the arguments of chapter 3 with his most recent analogy. If a son, then an heir--this is how the logic flows in 4:7. And with the "closing of the loop" in his argument, Paul now engages in a bit of scolding directed toward his Galatian audience.

Conclusion

"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:14-16).

The world began with the immersion of light from the lips of God: "Let there be light!" Light shines once more in the advent of Jesus, driving out the darkness and renewing humanity. Jesus makes a difference and so must we in our celebration of his coming. From Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount we hear the words of Jesus urging otherwise timid souls to throw off the bowl that hides their faith. Together we accept the commandment to practice the Gospel of grace through the deeds of righteousness. In so doing we truly make Christmas count for those who watch and see that the Father in heaven calls out a people of sons and daughters whose lives embody His goodness. We are after all "a city on a hill" placed there by God. Our hill is Calvary where Jesus died. Our hill is Olivet where there risen Lord commissions his followers to witness his coming. Our hill is the Mount of Transfiguration that promises changed lives in the image of the Jesus who came to Bethlehem, descends in the Spirit on Pentecost, and will come again with resurrection power for all who believe. May we shine and make a difference as we invite, serve, pray, and encourage honest seekers on their way to the kingdom. *Let us therefore make this Christmas count!*

*May you be filled with the wonder of Mary, the obedience of Joseph, the joy of the angels, the eagerness of the shepherds, the determination of the magi, and the peace of the Christ child. Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit bless you now and forever.*³

To God Be the Glory! Amen!

³ Ray Pritchard, "A Christmas Benediction" <https://www.crosswalk.com/blogs/dr-ray-pritchard/a-christmas-benediction-1460102.html>