

An Advent Prayer

“Come Thou Long Expected Jesus”

Galatians 4:1-7

Mark Vroegop

“I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. But 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. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.” (Galatians 4:1–7, ESV)

One of things I love about the holidays, especially Christmas, is the traditions we celebrate. I’m sure that your family has some traditions; ours family has them as well. Near the top of my “favorite traditions” is what happens when we decorate the Christmas tree.

My role is typically wrestling the tree into place, securing it in the stand, unraveling all the lights and scratching up my hands as I place the working lights in the tree. Now as I am pursuing this work of sanctification and test of my patience, Sarah is usually preparing the ornaments. There is a special box and a very important piece of yellow notebook paper. Written on this paper are the names of each child and a list of their ornaments.

You see, nearly each year of our children’s lives, Sarah has purchased each of them an ornament. And every one is special, cherished, and memorable. Years ago the lining up of the ornaments was more crowd control and behavioral management. But now it is kind of a “memory lane” sort of moment. As each ornament is pulled out, our kids say things like: “Oh yeah, I remember this one!” or “Remember when you gave this to me, Mom?” The joy of the moment is not in the ornament, per se, but in the memories.

There is one ornament that is special to all of us. For Christmas in 2004, someone kindly gave us an ornament the name “Sylvia” on it. She is our daughter who was still born just a few days before delivery, and putting her ornament on the tree the first few years was really, really hard. And while it has become easier to place the ornament on the tree, there is always a quiet moment for all of us when we get to her ornament. It is a meaningful moment with lots of memories.

Family traditions are significant because they serve as familiar landmarks along the journey of life. They connect us to the past, bring back important memories, and help us to not live only in the here and now.

Why Advent?

Advent is a bit like those family traditions. Every year, in the weeks leading up to Christmas, we join millions of other Christians around the world in the journey toward the celebration of the incarnation of the Son of God. During this season we reflect on the “advent,” the coming of Jesus Christ into the world.

But the celebration of Advent is not just about what happened; it is also about what is to come. In this respect, Advent has a dual purpose: to remember and to anticipate. Advent remembers the first coming of Jesus while also anticipating His second coming. Like all good traditions, it pulls us out of the here and now to remind us as to what this time of year is really all about.

In the late 1700s Charles Wesley wrote a hymn for the *Hymnbook of the Nativity of our Lord* that was compiled by his brother, John Wesley. Many of you are probably familiar with it. It was written for the Advent season.

*Come, Thou long expected Jesus
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel's Strength and Consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear Desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.*

For the next five Sundays, we are going to use this hymn as the framework to remember and anticipate. This hymn could be viewed as a prayer. It reflects on great doctrinal truths, and it looks forward to more to come. Here is what we find in verse two:

*Born Thy people to deliver,
Born a child and yet a King,
Born to reign in us forever,
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.
By Thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By Thine all sufficient merit,
Raise us to Thy glorious throne*

Hopefully you can see the dual purpose of this hymn, and I also hope that you can experience this dual reality during this Christmas season. In the midst of all the activity, celebration, and busyness, I hope you do not forget to remember and anticipate.

And for those of you for whom this season is particularly difficult because of a loss or pain in your life, I want you to see the beauty and power of remembering and anticipating. I want you to say, “Come, Lord Jesus!”

Four Advent Truths in Galatians

Of all the texts in the New Testament that talk about the Advent of Jesus Christ, Galatians 4:4-5 is one of the richest. In just two verses, the apostle Paul provides a remarkable summary of the Christian faith, including the importance of the advent of Jesus Christ. Timothy George, in his commentary on Galatians, says that Galatians 4:4-5 is *“one of the most compressed and highly charged passages in the entire letter because they present the objective basis, the Christological and soteriological foundation, for the doctrine of justification by faith.”*¹

Some scholars think that these verses may have been modeled after an early church confession. Their clarity and simplicity are extremely helpful. But it has been historically associated with Christmas liturgy and celebrations. In other words, this text has a great message and tradition.

What we find in verses 4-5 are four significant and hopeful truths regarding the Advent of Jesus. Let’s look at them and see what we can learn and apply to our lives.

1. A Sovereign Plan

The beginning phrase of verse four is a very important statement: *“But when the fullness of time had come . . .”* It is identifying that the advent of Jesus was orchestrated, planned, and implemented through the sovereign plan of God. In other words, everything about the first coming of Jesus was controlled by the will of God.

Some people take “fullness of time” to refer to the way in which the culture and the world were well suited for the arrival of Jesus and the spread of Christianity. This was the period of history known as the *Pax Romana*, a time of dominance by the Roman Empire which created a relative peace for over 200 years. During this time a common language developed, travel was relatively easy, and cities grew rapidly. All of this became the infrastructure through which Christianity could easily spread. The famed church historian, Kenneth Scott Latourette, estimated that by around 300 AD, one in ten people in the Roman world would have considered themselves Christians.² The cultural, political, social, and spiritual climate was prepared for the coming of Jesus. However, while all of this is true and reflects the providence of God, the context of Galatians 4 points to meaning even deeper than culture.

In this particular chapter, the apostle Paul is advancing his case for justification apart from the works of the Law or, to say it another way, that people are saved by faith, not by works. Galatians 3:11 states this very clearly: *“Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.””* (Galatians 3:11, ESV) In chapter four, Paul is comparing our relationship with the Law to the relationship of a child who is under the care of a guardian before inheriting his father’s estate. The idea seems to be that a wealthy family has a minor child living in

¹ Timothy George, *The New American Commentary on Galatians*, (Broadman and Holman Publishers: Nashville, Tennessee, 1994), 300).

² http://mason.gmu.edu/~ddonald/typeassignment/index3.htm#_edn1

the home, and he is set to become the beneficiary. However, since he is not “of age,” the child is managed and controlled by others, such that his life is more like a slave than a son.

“I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father.” (Galatians 4:1–2, ESV)

Paul’s point in Galatians is the way that the gospel through faith makes us more like a son and how the Law, prior to Christ, made us more like a slave. As a son, we inherit the spiritual blessings of our heavenly father, and the Law is our tutor to bring us to Christ (Gal. 3:24). And once you are a son of God by faith in Jesus, it changes everything!

“for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” (Galatians 3:26–29, ESV)

This is the good news about the gospel. But how does it connect to “the fullness of time”? In verse two Paul says, *“he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father.”* The father sets the time for the son to become the full heir, and it was the Father who determined exactly when to send the Son for the purpose of redemption.

The point here is a simple but profoundly important idea: “God is the primary actor in the drama of salvation. He alone determined the appropriate time for the sending of Christ.”³ Advent celebrates not just the coming of Jesus, but it also highlights the beauty of God’s sovereign plan. God knew what he was doing when He sent His Son. He knew exactly where to send Him, what He would face, and even how everything would end. God knew and planned the crucifixion of his Son (Acts 2:23). “When the fullness of time had come.”

So Advent is a reminder that God is really good at working out His own plan. And that is important for at least two reasons. First, it means that we can look forward to the second coming of Jesus with calm assurance, especially as crises come and the world seems to lose its way. We can rest, knowing that God is still working out His plan, and when the fullness of time comes again, Jesus will return.

Second, this is important for those of you who are in the middle of a difficult season which is only made worse with the holidays. Perhaps 2013 delivered a hard providence in your life. Thanksgiving was hard, but Christmas is going to be even more challenging. A health issue, a relationship mess, a death in the family, a loss of a job, or some other painful reality may cause you to wonder, “What is going on?” And while you may never fully know why, you need to be reminded that God is in control. God is kindly working out His plan, but you may not be able to see it all right now. Eventually the fullness of God’s plan will be clear. It may not be this year or the next or the next. But you still can trust Him to work out His sovereign plan.

³ George, 294.

2. A Supernatural Intervention

The word *advent* means “coming,” and it is a celebration of the first coming, with a view toward the second. Christmas is the celebration of the arrival of Jesus in the flesh, but it is even more. The birth of Jesus was a supernatural intervention. The incarnation of Jesus was the means by which God would make redemption possible.

Galatians 4:4 says, “God sent forth his Son.” It is a very succinct summary of the gospel – that God would send His Son as the means of spiritual intervention for people who could not save themselves. Here is how 1 John 4:9-10 says it:

“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.” (1 John 4:9–10, ESV)

The message of the gospel is simply that God sent Jesus to intervene for helpless sinners in the problem of their separation. That is why 1 John uses the term “propitiation.” It means “to be satisfied.” God sent His Son so that the death of Jesus could satisfy the just demands of God’s holiness in light of our sinfulness. “God sent his Son” is more than just a fact; it is the basis for hope. It means that God rescues sinners.

This intervention is what the Old Testament prophets longed for. They looked for a coming Messiah who would help them, lead them, and save them. Isaiah 9 promised that there would be a child born.

“...the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.” (Isaiah 9:6–7, ESV)

And it would be through this Messiah that the people would be saved:

“... by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.” (Isaiah 53:11, ESV)

Now the people of Israel did not fully realize what the role of the Messiah was all about. They allowed their “felt need” for political deliverance and national identity to eclipse the real spiritual need in their lives. And yet God still intervened. They were helpless, confused, and rebellious people, and yet God still sent forth His Son.

Advent is a celebration of the intervention of God, and it is a time to reflect on our need to have Jesus intervene again. Our world needs another supernatural intervention. Advent looks back to the first divine intervention with a longing heart that says, “How Long, O Lord?” (Rev 6:10). It is well-said by the hymn “It is Well with my Soul.”

*And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
Even so, it is well with my soul.*

There is something fundamentally wrong with the world: sin. And as wonderful as the holiday season can be, it is never all of what it should be. Our world needs supernatural intervention. Maybe you need supernatural intervention. It is important for all of us to consider our own personal intervention. Has God rescued you from your sin? Has Jesus become your Lord and Savior?

But this is also a great reminder to those who approach this holiday with huge issues or enormous challenges. You need to remember that God has intervened before, and He will do it again. It may not fully come until Jesus returns, but make no mistake about it: He will make it all right. Until then, however, it is well with my soul.

3. A Personal Connection

A central part of the beauty of what we celebrate this time of year is the fact that Jesus entered our broken world as a helpless infant. His life and teaching were at times paradoxical. For example, the humble are exalted, the exalted are humbled, the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. This is what Christianity is all about.

Following these two theologically driven statements, Paul gives two participles that describe the condition and status of the Son of God: He was “born of a woman” and “born under the law.” Both of these are directly tied to the humanity of Jesus.

“Born of a woman” is simply a way for the Bible to say that Jesus was born as a human being. Paul had previously established Jesus’ deity (“God sent for his Son”), and now he is emphasizing that Jesus became a man. He did not just look like a man; he became a man. Without sacrificing His divinity, Jesus became human, with all of the limitations associated with fallen humanity. He was tempted, tested, and tired. He was hungry, sad, and angry. He experienced the full cup of our humanity.

The writer of Hebrews uses Jesus’ understanding of our condition as motivation to pray and as encouragement. If Jesus was human, and if He was tempted, then we can boldly approach Him for help when we need it.

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:15–16, ESV)

Jesus was also “born under the law.” What does this mean? It means that Jesus lived under the requirements of the Old Testament Law. He was circumcised on the eighth day, read the Torah,

prayed to His Heavenly Father, attended the synagogue, faithfully fulfilling all the demands of the Law.⁴ He obeyed perfectly, while living under the same constraints and obligations that every human being has ever faced. Jesus lived under the same rules that every other human experienced and yet never sinned. Not once. He fully obeyed.

So what do you see when you see the baby in the manger? Do you see just a baby? Do you see just the Son of God? Advent is about seeing both! The first coming of Jesus connects us to him in a way that is unique and powerful. He understands the brokenness of the world, and yet He fully obeyed the Father. He knows what it is like to be mistreated and reviled. And yet he also provided a model for how to live.

“When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.” (1 Peter 2:23, ESV)

But this was not all of what Peter said. He tells us this about Jesus so that we can live differently:

“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.” (1 Peter 2:21, ESV)

Jesus was born of a woman and under the law so that we never have to wonder if He understands. What’s more, it also means that we can cry out to him to “come” when we need help. And it is a reminder that there is coming a day when our connection to Jesus will be even more personal and even more intimate.

4. A Redemptive Purpose

Our short passage closes with the glorious reason why God has done all of this. Verse five gives us the purpose behind what Paul has described in verse four and the purpose behind the first and second coming.

“to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.” (Galatians 4:5, ESV)

We have highlighted this some already, but we see it so clearly here. Additionally, Paul uses two terms that are loaded with meaning: redeem and adoption.

“To redeem” implies that we have been bought out of something. It has a negative background associated with slavery. The picture is that of a person who is on the auction block of slavery, and someone steps forward to purchase his or her freedom. “To redeem” means to purchase freedom. And in the case of Paul’s description, the slavery is not physical; it is spiritual. Human beings were enslaved to sin until Jesus “redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13).

⁴ George, 303

But it does not stop there. The redemption was not merely to rescue us from slavery; it was to make us sons! “To adopt” meant the same thing in Paul’s day as it does ours. In adoption you make someone family who would not have been family by any other means. Adoption does not just welcome you into a home. That is hospitality. Adoption says, “Now you are my child.” And this is what God has done for us in Christ. In Christ He has made us His children, and that is why Paul ends this paragraph by talking about the Spirit and by using terms that are highly familial:

“And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.” (Galatians 4:6–7, ESV)

This is who you are. Your identity has changed. In Christ you used to be a slave, but now you are a son. Everything about you and everything about your future has changed.

So when you look at Advent and see a baby, remember that it was this baby that made the miracle of your redemption possible. When you consider Christmas, remember that it was this baby that made possible the greatest transformation in your life. Remember that it was this baby that brought you into God’s family.

And as you remember, you should also anticipate that one day this same Jesus is going to return so that we can live with him forever. He promised that He would return. Until then we wait for the coming day when we will be fully made like him. And because of this promise we wait – even through suffering – knowing that God is using everything to make us like His Son.

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.” (Romans 8:18–19, ESV)

Advent reminds us about these things. It is a great tradition that invites us to remember and anticipate as we live in the gap between the first and second coming of Jesus.

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