

Dear God, so what's Christmas really all about?

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- [0 : 0 0] Joshua. And everything you need will also be found on this green paper. There's an outline in there if you wish to follow along.
- Now, about a week and a half ago, I was at a dinner when I received a WhatsApp message. After announcing the contents of this message to my dinner companions, the table got understandably excited.
- What was it that got them so happy? It was a message apparently suggesting that the Chief Minister's Office had approved December 26 as a public holiday.
- Now, that was certainly Christmas cheer for many. Except that half an hour later, I got another message saying that it was fake news. And so everyone became understandably more subdued.
- So much for adding an extra holiday. And if you didn't know there's no holiday tomorrow, now you know. After all, for quite a number of people, that's what Christmas is really all about.
- [1 : 0 8] A public holiday. Well, I doubt they'll say it so explicitly. They might say that it's about spending time with the family. Or joining in the festivity. Or being reminded of the nativity. Maybe. But hey, the day off is what it's really all about. But pastor, you say. That's not us. You're talking to the wrong crowd here. And I agree. If you're with us here this morning, I think you're probably right to feel a little bit offended if I just lump you into that category.
- You know full well that Christmas is more than just about a public holiday. After all, you did roll out of bed to join us this morning. But if it's not just about the public holidays, what is Christmas really all about?
- Well, let me explore a few popular options with you. For some people, perhaps even some of us this morning, Christmas is all about earning.
- [2 : 0 8] We look at our church attendance over the year. And despite our best intentions, we can see that we didn't quite fulfill our New Year's resolution of making it to church at least once a month.
- We got up to a few naughty things that we don't exactly want our parents to know. But we kind of suspect that God does know. And so we think, uh-oh, I think I better earn my way into God's good books.
- And so what better way than to try to get some extra bonus points with God by being present at his son's birthday party? Or maybe that's just too cynical a take.
- Perhaps we really do desire to turn over a new leaf. And maybe you think that, oh, Christmas, that's a great starting point to earn back lost opportunities to be good.
- Well, let the Christmas spirit fill me up, you think? And hopefully it will keep me going for the entire 2020. Or it could be that you believe that you've actually been a very solid citizen this entire year.

[3 : 18] And so Christmas is really just the icing on the cake. It's the chance to come to God and to show him all the good things that you've been up to this year. And hopefully you can get a performance-related winfall in return.

And so that's one option. For some people, Christmas is about earning. Second option. Christmas is all about parading.

Now, if you're not a Christian here this morning, but the sense of Christmas you're getting is that it's all about the parades, well, I don't blame you. For if you were to read the local papers and social media this year, somehow that's the impression you get.

Let me explain. In Kuching, in Mary, and even in Bao, we've had churches come together to march through the city centre in a parade to show solidarity as Christians and to bless the people around them with the giving of gifts.

Now, that is obviously a good thing. But it's interesting, isn't it, whenever you read about those parades in the local papers, the only thing that they focus on is how this Christmas parade show that Sarawakians value religious harmony.

[4 : 40] Again, religious and racial harmony is a social good that we should value and certainly something we should not squander. Let me be absolutely clear about that.

But the undertone you sometimes get in the comments that the politicians or the community leaders make is as if the major point of these parades is to put on display the moral superiority of us Sarawakians to other Malaysians.

Look at how much more tolerant we are. But is that what Christmas is really all about? Simply to show that Sarawak is a better place to live than other parts of Malaysia?

Now, clearly for a few people, that's their main agenda. That's what they want Christmas to be all about. Well, let me just give you one more option.

Option three. For some people, Christmas is about Jesus-ing. I just invented that word, by the way. Ah, you say, ah, so this is where pastor lands.

[5 : 48] Well, again, not quite. Let me explain. When I say that for some people, Christmas is about Jesus-ing, I mean that for many of us, especially if we've grown up in a family that calls itself Christian, we do kind of know that Christmas is all about Jesus, that we're celebrating his birth, that we're supposed to be giving honour to him.

And so we nod enthusiastically when people say, ah, yeah, no, actually Christmas is all about Jesus. We're Jesus-ing. We have an inkling that it's something to do with his love.

And in fact, that's why some of you are in church this morning. That's what Christmas is for you. It's a religious tradition that you enjoy, even cherish, the carols, the cosiness, the comfort of familiarity.

But if someone were to ask you, so, ah, Christmas is all about Jesus? Well, tell me more. Tell me more about this Jesus and what he did that's so great.

Well, you struggle to say anything beyond, ah, Jesus is all about God's love, you know? You know? You know? So let's correct that.

[7 : 10] This morning we're asking, dear God, what is Christmas really all about? And the best way to answer that question, of course, is to go back to God's word.

And this morning, we're going to turn to Galatians chapter 4, verses 4 to 7, which is printed in these little green booklets, because that's a nice, succinct, and clear passage to help us understand the real meaning of Christmas.

And we'll see that Christmas isn't about earning. It certainly isn't about parading. And yes, it's about Jesus, but not in a wishy-washy kind of way.

And if I were to choose just one word that the author of our passage, Paul, would use to summarise Christmas today, it would be this. Adoption.

Adoption. Or to expand that into a sentence, it would be this. The Son of God became man so that man can become sons of God.

[8 : 13] The Son of God became man so that man can become sons of God. That's the gist of today's Bible reading. Well, let's take each half of that sentence in turn.

First half of that sentence. The Son of God became man. That's what verse 4 is all about. But when the sad time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law.

Now, today's passage starts with a but. What does that tell you? It tells you that we're not at the beginning of the story. There was something that happened before.

Now, why is that important? Let me just give you an analogy. I just finished reading a novel called *The Seven and a Half Deaths of Evelyn Hart Castle*. It's a murder mystery novel, but with a twist.

The main character can time travel and switch bodies, although it's beyond his control. And so it's quite a mind-bending book. And trust me, if you were to start reading that book in the middle, you'd be utterly confused.

[9 : 26] There's already a million things and a million characters that have already been introduced. You have no idea where you are. You wouldn't get it at all. But if you start from the beginning, you'll at least get the hang of the story.

You know who the characters are. You know who Sebastian Bell is and this woman called Anna and so on? And what's the problem? And it's the same with this passage. We're right in the middle, but we need to start in the beginning to make sense of it.

And we need to start with the central character of verse 4. God himself. Who is God? Well, don't be offended, but many of us, I suspect, think of God just like Hitler did.

When Hitler used to speak about God, he always called him the Almighty. In other words, for Hitler, God is all-powerful, pure might.

And certainly that's true. God is all-powerful. He is the Almighty. But perhaps that better describes what God is, not who God is.

[10 : 40] So that doesn't answer our question. But wonderfully, the Bible doesn't just tell us what God is, but who he is.

God is the Father. That's his fundamental identity. That's who he is. And so that means everything he does is fatherly in the best possible sense of that word.

he provides, he protects, he's strong, and he's tender. He's the ideal father. But here's the other thing.

If God is father, if that's who he is at his core, that means he must have a son.

And now the Bible tells us something else that's full of mystery. God did not have to create a son for himself. No, from before the beginning of time.

[11 : 41] Because God was always father, there was always the son. That's the second character, you notice, in verse 4.

There is God and there is the son whom he sends. And both of them have always existed. John's gospel captures the paradox this way.

In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. So here lies the mystery of the Christian faith.

I'm currently going through a catechism with my 3-year-old son. A catechism is basic instruction in the Christian faith done in a Q&A; format. And if you were to ask my son question 3 of the catechism, how many persons are they in God?

He will answer you in a cute voice. There are 3 persons in the one true and living God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

[12 : 48] That's what the Bible teaches. The Bible says that God was never lonely but was always the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

what Christians call the Trinity. And now let me tell you why all of that matters. If God is Father, that means he is intensely relational.

The Father has always known, loved, and delighted in the Son and the Spirit. And the Son and the Spirit has always known, loved, and delighted in the Father.

And that means a love relationship lies at the heart of this universe. For out of this beautiful, loving relationship, God created the world.

He created us not because he needed to be in love, to have someone love him as Father. Rather, he created us out of love, so that more people can share in the love of the Father and the Son.

[14 : 01] And so that's how it was in the beginning. There's the Father and the Son, the two main characters. And don't worry about the third main character, the Holy Spirit. We'll get to him later.

But verse 4 says, God sent his Son at this sad time. Why? What sad time? Well, to understand that, we need to work out what's been happening before this sad time.

Now, if you were to look in verse 5, Paul talks about those under the law. That's us. And in the verses just before verse 4, which are not printed on your sheet, Paul has been explaining to us to be under the law means we are imprisoned, enslaved.

How and why? Well, it works like this. Before this sad time, yes, God created us out of love to share in his love.

And so that means we were created lovers. And love works when it has a direction. You don't love love, you love someone or something.

[15 : 12] Love is always directed towards something. And because we're created lovers, we always love someone or something. But our loves go wrong.

Sometimes our love is deficient, like when we get lazy and we fail to do good to our neighbor as we should. Sometimes our love is misguided, like when we become envious of others, wanting what they have that we cannot have.

success. Sometimes our love is excessive, like when we become greedy and chase something like career success and approval from those in our fields above all else.

So we have excessive love for something like career success. love. And at the root of all this is a failure to love God. Our love is not directed towards God.

It's a desire for self-government, like a little child who wishes to assert his will against his father. But that means we're not playing by the rules.

[16 : 20] And in our world, whenever we break the law, what does that mean? It means we go to prison. And imprisonment means a kind of enslavement to your conditions. You're stuck in a cell, limited in what you can do.

And it's the same in God's universe. We are under the law. And breaking the law, which we all do, means imprisonment and enslavement. Now, you might not feel enslaved, but think about it.

Think about technology, for instance. When iPhones and Facebook and WhatsApp appeared, they promised much, didn't they? Instant connection with our loved ones, 24 hours a day.

Never get lost again, thanks to ways. A world of knowledge on our fingertips, as we can Google anything from baking Christmas muffins to repairing fairy lights.

And yet, somehow, it all gets twisted. Instead of connection, addiction, we end up addicted to our screens and no longer converse with one another.

[17 : 29] We get lost in gossip and fake news spreads much faster. And a world of darkness, like child pornography, is more accessible than ever before with just a Google search.

We tried to master social media, but social media ended up mastering us. we're slaves. Or take politics.

Last year, everyone was convinced that the woes of Malaysia would only be resolved by a change in government. But what we've discovered is that the ballot box isn't as powerful as we think.

The same systemic issues remain. Inequality, incompetence, infighting. Almost as if we can't help but choose the same things.

Even if we choose different faces. We're slaves. And so we're just like the slaves who lived in America during the 17th century.

[18 : 33] When it was Christmas, their slave masters would allow them some time off, and they would drink some alcohol, have some turkey, make merry with music and dancing.

But that didn't change the fact that they were still slaves. And in fact, sometimes the slave masters would use Christmas to demonstrate their power over them by threatening to cancel the Christmas celebrations if they behave out of line, or by deliberately showing favoritism in the giving of gifts.

And all this was to exercise power at who was in charge over the slaves. Well, that's what we're like. Our lives can have many moments of joy, of celebration, of merry-making, but that doesn't change our status as slaves, people who cannot help but be addicted to pride and selfishness and the lack of self-control.

And this helps us set up what Christmas is really all about. You see, the sad time mentioned in verse 4 is Christmas.

Well, let me read verse 4 again, this time with verse 5. But when the sad time had fully come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law.

[20 : 05] Now, here's Christmas in three words. God stepped in. The son of God, the eternal, divine second person of the Trinity, took on human nature.

And so the son of God became man. That's what it means when it says he's born of a woman. He's truly human. He's just like us.

What a staggering thought. The son of God didn't just dip his toes in to test the water. He dived into the muddy swamps of our world.

He knows what it's like from the inside. My friends, have you ever been hungry? Felt lonely?

Suffered injury? Have you ever been made fun of? Had family who didn't support you? Had friends who talked behind your back? Have you ever been in grief?

[21 : 09] Or maybe that's even your experience now this Christmas? Well, the son of God has personally gone through every single one of those experiences and he did it out of his own accord because he became man.

All for what? verse 5 tells us the purpose to redeem. Now, whenever we use the word redeem nowadays, it's normally to do with some voucher for parkson or for boba tea.

I'd like to redeem my grass jelly milk tea, please. But that word, to redeem, means to buy back, to pay a price. And Jesus didn't come just waving about his American Express.

he came to pay the price to free us slaves. And if we look at the price tag, this is what he did.

And this is what we'll find. A list of everything we said or thought or did or wished that we did. All the things that we wish upon other people.

[22 : 23] All the yucky stuff that spewed over in the words that we later regretted. all the feelings of anger that we didn't know we had inside of us. And on top of that, all the stuff that we didn't do but should have done.

And I want you to imagine adding all those up. How long is that list? It would be endless.

Now imagine being slapped with an invoice for all those things. But here's what Jesus did. Jesus came, born as a woman, born under the law, to where we were, to our dysfunctional environment, and he paid the price.

He settled the invoice. The Father loved us so much that he took the initiative to send his very beloved son, the centerpiece of this universe, to its very depths to become like one of us.

his son was willing to make himself subject to sorrows, wounds, and tears, and whatever for? To taste death for us.

[23 : 39] For that was the price he paid his very life. That's why Christmas happened. Do you see? Those tiny hands brought about by the Holy Spirit held by Mary would one day grow to be the same hands that voluntarily stretch themselves out on the cross so that nails would be driven through them?

Those tiny feet, tickled by Joseph, would one day grow to be the same feet that walk the dusty roads to Calvary so that we wouldn't have to walk the broad roads to hell.

that tiny body, so adorable, yet so frail, would one day grow up to be the same body that would wear a purple robe and be crushed to death so that you and I might live.

Jesus was born to die. Why? Why? Why? Because the Son loves the Father and wants to do his will.

[24 : 50] And the Father loved his wayward people so much that he gave up what he most valued, his very son. This is what Christmas is really all about.

But that isn't the end. You see, when I redeem something with my grab-pay points, like five ringgit of my next grab-ride or grab-food order, I use it once and then it's discarded, thrown away, forgotten.

But that's not how it works here. For Christ's work of redemption is only half the story. Remember the rest of the sentence. The Son of God became man so that man can become sons of God.

So that man can become sons of God. Having redeemed us God didn't discard us. No, his plan, verse 5, was so that we would be, we would receive adoption to sonship.

Imagine that. The God who is forever father and forever son wants to expand the family. sons. Now, when we hear sons, I'm sure we're thinking, but what about the daughters?

[26 : 14] And don't worry, the daughters are absolutely not excluded. But the reason why Paul talks about sonship, about becoming sons here, was that because at that time, in that culture, it was the sons who inherited everything.

And that's why at the end of verse 7, those who are God's children are heirs. And so when he says we're being adopted as sons, he's not saying girls not welcome.

Rather, he is saying whether you're male or female, like sons in that culture, you get everything. It's adoption to sonship.

It's adoption to an everlasting inheritance. this was God's plan all along. God the Father loved God the Son, and they wanted to welcome more people into their circle of love.

And so God gave his Son, Jesus Christ, so that he could give us everything as his adopted sons. But God hasn't finished giving.

[27 : 32] Look at verse 6. Because you are his sons, God sent the spirit of his son into our hearts, the spirit who calls out Abba, Father.

Imagine a child who is waiting for a Christmas present from his dad, only to discover that his dad has gotten him presents, plural. And that's exactly what God has done.

He's given his son, and now he's giving his spirit another present. Whatever for?

Well, let's say that you've adopted a son from Cambodia. The paperwork has been done and this often is now legally your child.

But you don't just say, okay, all done, the paperwork has been done, he's my child, right? So let me just go back and watch TV. No. You begin to pour out your affection and love for this child.

[28 : 34] You embrace him. You do everything in your power to make sure that he feels like he's part of your family so that he can see you as his daddy. And that's what God did.

Jesus became fully man so that he wouldn't partially but fully redeem us, no legal loopholes. But now the Holy Spirit comes and awakens our hearts so that we begin to call God Abba, Father, Papa.

He gives us his spirit to assure us we fully belong. This is what Christmas is really all about.

The Son of God became man so that man can become sons of God. and that changes everything. Because it means if you take Christmas to heart, if you believe it, you are accepted.

You are accepted. You're in his arms as a son and that's the safest place to be. Our record shows that we're not worthy to bear his name.

[29 : 51] We're not fit for a place in his family. God and yet he adopted us, not based on our record, but in accordance with his good pleasure.

And the will has already been made. It states clearly we're heirs. 100% accepted. It also means you are loved.

You are loved. You can enjoy intimacy with God, the father. Think of a little child. the way he runs joyfully to his father to show him the latest toy, the way he goes to him when he's got a mosquito bite that needs soothing, the way he goes to him to simply talk about anything or just point out the moon and the stars to him.

And that's how we can be like with God. Abba, father. Even the word Abba sounds childlike, doesn't it? And we can enter into that fullness of that relationship.

For God loves you the way he loves Jesus. What better news can they be? And finally, it means this.

[31 : 04] You can change. You can change. I hope it's crystal clear this morning that Christmas is not about earning. It's certainly not about parading.

And it is about Jesus, but not in a vague, sentimental, fuzzy kind of way, but in a rather concrete specific, early, and planned way.

But it's also about you. You see, to enter this circle of love that is God's family, you need to receive Jesus. Accept him. Trust him.

How do you do that? Not simply by repeating a prayer like a mathematical formula, or trying to manufacture some emotion within you. No, it's more concrete and specific and more actionable than that.

Imagine you're on a bicycle and you realize that you're going in the wrong direction. And so you have to take a U-turn to go into the new direction. Now, this might take some time depending on your speed, but eventually you change direction.

[32 : 15] And receiving Jesus means making that U-turn. direction is about changing direction so that you're running to Jesus, not away from him.

It means that you're now going to live according to his rules because it's his universe. And it means that you keep cycling in that new direction.

It's not a one-off action. But if you've been given his Holy Spirit, that's what you want to do anyway. you want to run towards your Heavenly Father because the Spirit who lives in you cries out, Abba, Father.

You can change if you go to Jesus. The question this Christmas is, will you? So my friends, please, please see, Christmas is far, far better news than just a public holiday.

It is far more substantial news than just a parade. It is authentic news that brings great joy, not fake news that's based on tradition. And if you make Christ, the Christ of Christmas, your Saviour and your Lord today, the most amazing news is that this God of the universe sings over you, the rebel now his child.

[33 : 40] No wonder the angels look on in amazement and praise. Christ. And so if you've never heard what Christmas is really all about before, and this is the first time you've heard anything like this, then I ask you, please, please, come and find out more about Jesus.

We've got Gospels at the back for you to read up on the story of Jesus. We've got some tracks. If you want to connect with us as a church, you can keep doing so. We've got a newcomer's booth up there, and we've got a Christianity Explored course that will run after Chinese New Year, and if you keep coming to our church, you'll hear about that.

But whatever you do, now that you know what Christmas is really all about, act on it. Well, with this, let me just wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Amen.