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25 December 2011

SWAPPING BIRTHDAYS Matthew 1:18-25

Back in 1891, Robert Louis Stevenson, author of such classics as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Treasure Island*, gave a rather odd gift to the daughter of a friend of his. This friend, Henry Ide, once joked that Christmas was not the happiest day of the year in his household. His fourteen-year-old daughter, Annie, had been born on Christmas, and she always complained that she got cheated out of a separate birthday party.

So Robert Louis Stevenson came up with the idea of giving away his birthday which fell on November 13. He drew up a legal document transferring all the “rights and privileges” of his birthday to Miss Annie Ide. From that day forward, Annie celebrated a new birthday on November 13th.

Stevenson gave that gift to Annie Ide over a hundred years ago, but knowing that story helps me get a fresh understanding of the gift God gave us a little over two thousand years ago. You see, there’s something that’s never quite made sense for me. Namely, if Christmas is Jesus’ birthday, how come we get all the presents? But I finally get it. Jesus has officially and forever transferred his birthday to you and me.

Think about what it means to be born into the fallen, sinful, rebellious human family as you were, as I was. The whole human family is alienated from God. Just to be born into this family of ours is to be born into sinfulness, born into separation from our Maker, born under a death sentence. That’s the birthright that belongs to you and me as children of Adam and Eve, and that’s the burden Jesus lifts from our shoulders and takes upon himself.

In exchange for our birth into grief, pain, disappointment, despair, and sin, Christ gives us *his* birthday. As Robert Louis Stephenson did with little Annie Ide, Jesus transfers to you and me all the “rights and privileges” of his birthday.

What does that mean?

It means we have a new birth in his name and new life in his Spirit. If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation and the old has passed away—the old fears, the old doubts, the old destructive habits are passing away now that we have a new birthday into a new beginning, a new life, a new future.

What else? Christmas also means we have a new innocence in God’s eyes. The righteousness and holiness of Christ are given to us. I remember the wonderful Old Testament vision of Joshua the high priest standing in the heavenly courtroom. Joshua is there as the stand-in for God’s people, and he’s dressed in dirty rags, robes stained with sin and smirched with filth. Satan enters the court as the prosecuting attorney and accuses Joshua of sinning against God. Satan demands a sentence of “Guilty!”

Joshua, besmirched and defenseless, can only hang his head. But suddenly at God’s command, an angel strips off Joshua’s filthy garments and dresses him with spotless white robes of the finest fabric and crowns his head with a rich turban.

That’s how it is with us. Now that Christ has given us his birthday, we are wrapped in his holiness, draped in his purity, clothed with his righteousness. The sinless innocence of his birth is now transferred to us.

Christmas also means we have a new relationship with God. Jesus is the Son of God, and if his birthday is now ours, then through him we have become the sons and daughters of God. When Christ came into the world “to all who received him...he gave power to become children of God; who were born not of blood nor of the will the flesh...but of God.”

Think of that. You are God's own child, not just because God made you, but because God has adopted you in Christ. Now that Jesus has transferred his birthday to you, you are born anew into the family of God.

Of all the Christmas festivities, it's family that really matters, isn't it? More than the parties, more than the food, more than the gifts, we rejoice in being with people who care about us, we give thanks for a circle of love where we belong, where we have a place, where we are accepted and welcome.

During World War Two, a group of American GI's found themselves in a small French village on Christmas Eve. Far away from their own families, they decided to bring some cheer to an orphanage on the outskirts of town, so they bought and bartered for toys and candy, and they showed up at the orphanage the next day. Most of the children were thrilled by the gifts, but one little girl five or six years old held back, standing apart from the festivities.

A soldier approached her and said in French, "We have lots of gifts here. What do you want?"

In a tiny voice the girl replied, "I want someone to hold me."

So he wrapped his arms around her and said, "You can be my little girl today."

Christmas means we have someone to hold us. Christmas means that, in Christ, God draws us near and whispers, "You can be my child—today and always."

So happy birthday to you and happy birthday to me.

And for our birthday gifts—for a new beginning, a new righteousness, a new relationship with God—for these best of all gifts, praise and glory and thanks to the Child of Bethlehem.

Soli Deo Gloria!