



Sermon Growth Guide

October 9, 2022
Bound for Freedom



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Freedom - Bound for Freedom

Galatians 4:21-31

Key Verse: Galatians 4:31

“Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.”

Big Idea: We are not enslaved to religious legalism, but, in Christ, are children of grace.

Foundations

We are rounding our final bend in the Galatians - **Freedom** series! Just two more chapters to go!

Paul is writing to Christians in the city of Galatia, and throughout this letter he’s developing an argument against the “Judaizers.” These so-called-Christians are telling the church that they need to adhere to the Jewish law in order to truly know and follow God.

Paul desperately wants the Galatian church to understand that they are not beholden to laws around food consumption, Sabbath, ritual festivals, circumcision, etc. In fact, those things are antithetical to the Gospel!

Paul summarizes his argument in these chapters with an illustration of sorts. He refers back to Genesis and likens the instructions of the Judaizers to Hagar, who became pregnant out of human effort, or “flesh.” Paul says that the true Gospel, which the Galatians initially understood, is like Sarah, the infertile wife of Abraham who was miraculously given a child through God’s promise and intervention.

We, followers of Jesus, are children of the promise. In Paul’s illustration, we belong to the free woman. May we not become bogged down by legalistic religion and external things which distract from the grace and love of God the Father in Jesus Christ!

Understanding God’s Word

Together, read Galatians 4:21-31.

What is confusing or concerning about this passage?

What sorts of things are associated with Hagar, the slave woman?

What sorts of things are associated with Sarah, the free woman?

Applying God’s Word

We are not enslaved to religious legalism, but, in Christ, are children of grace.

When are you tempted to drift toward a legalistic approach to following Jesus?

How might “living as children of the promise” be different from living according to the law or the flesh in your life?

Witnessing God’s Word

Who in your life has been turned off from considering Jesus because of the perception that faith is about legalism, rules, rituals, etc.? How might you begin a conversation about the true nature of knowing, following, and belonging to Jesus?

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I'm Greg, one of the pastors here. I especially work with people in their 20s and get to help people explore and consider faith in Jesus. I love autumn! The character, Anne of Green Gables, says, "I'm so glad I live in a world where there are Octobers." I'm with you Anne! One of the best parts of autumn is the return of football season! I love it! Anyone else? It's hard to watch our local team right now, but overall, with football you get great rivalries, Cinderella stories, you have an excuse to eat nachos and bean dip every week, there's friendly competition, fantasy football... It's all just so fun!

Now, I played soccer as a kid, but I always wanted to play football! My mom just wouldn't let me. She thought it was too dangerous. But, by freshman year of high school my mom could see that I was very mature and was able to make my own decisions. So, I joined the team! And, it turned out that I was absolutely terrible at football... like SO terrible. I trained all summer, did two-a-day practices, wore pads, and the result was that I just got yelled at constantly! I could not figure out the routes, I seemed to always be getting penalties, I couldn't quite figure out what position I or anyone else besides the quarterback was supposed to be playing. I mean, American football is INCREDIBLY complex! There are SO MANY different plays with code names and each person on each play has to run a specific route, block a specific person, turn at the exact right time for things to work, and after three months, I couldn't figure it out!

So, I had a decision to make. Am I a football player? Or am I a soccer player? I mean, soccer's great! There aren't any false starts...you just play! If you're on defense and you get a breakaway with the ball, great! Go! Run! Of course teams have plays/strategies and there are rules, but generally you're just free to play the game! So, I ended up leaving the football team as the season started and chose to play soccer instead, and it was the RIGHT choice!

Friends, we've been walking verse-by-verse through Galatians this fall. And it almost seems like the church in Galatia was initially playing soccer, but they're now being led astray by a bunch of NFL-enthusiasts. The Christians in Galatia initially experienced the love, freedom and abundant grace of Jesus, and they experienced the movement of the Holy Spirit in their individual and communal lives, but they're now being pushed toward legalism, strict rituals, external expressions of "religiosity" by so-called-Christian leaders.

The thing is, I know this isn't just their problem. WE struggle with this all the time as well! We're constantly tempted to do more, to pray more, to live out superstitions to ensure we're in God's good grace. We're so often drawn back to the idea that we need to perform well or follow the rules well to earn a place in God's family.

Today, Paul is going to set things straight for all of us, not with a sports metaphor, but with a maternal one. From Galatians 4:21-31: "Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by

the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise. These things are being taken figuratively: The women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written: "Be glad, barren woman, you who never bore a child; shout for joy and cry aloud, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband." Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. But what does Scripture say? 'Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son.' Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman."

This is the Word of the Lord... *Thanks be to God.*

Before we try to look at anything else, let's pause and first say a few words about slavery. This is a metaphor. Paul is using an illustration, and it is based on the practice of slavery. In our Alpha conversations and in other discussions with individuals deconstructing their faith, it's sometimes suggested that the Bible is pro-slavery. To that end, we know that in the Antebellum South, slave owners used Scripture to attempt to keep the men and women they were abusing in line. They pulled bits and pieces out of Scripture and used it to affirm the atrocities of chattel slavery, of the transatlantic slave trade. They took a message of freedom and redemption and used it as an instrument of oppression. But that is absolutely not what we encounter when we actually read through the Old and especially the New Testament. Freedom from slavery is baked into the Scriptures.

The Bible, the story of God's redemptive work in the world, is on a clear trajectory away from slavery and toward freedom. Author Esau McCauley writes: "[The Bible] does not on every page legislate slavery out of existence. Nonetheless, the Christian narrative, our core theological principles, and our ethical imperatives create a world in which slavery becomes unimaginable." The God we see throughout the Scriptures is known for seeing the suffering of His people and rushing to rescue them from oppression! Our God is a liberator! SO, is Scripture, is Christianity, pro-slavery? No. In fact, it gives us the tools to deconstruct this abhorrent practice in all its forms. Not only in the days of William Wilberforce and the abolitionists, but today as slavery continues across the world. So, with that said, let's return to the main focus of this passage.

My friend and I have sometimes joked about preachers who engage in or subject people to what we call, "Illustration Inception" (we invented this term based on the movie "Inception" with Leo DiCaprio, which features dreams within a dream).



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Basically, it's when a preacher says, "To understand this passage, let me give you an illustration, but to understand this illustration, let me give you another illustration, but to really appreciate that illustration, here's a quote from C.S. Lewis..."

Paul's a preacher, and I think we get into a bit of that here, so let's try to untangle Paul's Illustration Inception and see if we can get a better understanding of his instructions for the Galatians. We're going to ignore the fact that I'm a preacher who is about to use some of my own illustrations. So, Paul is writing to Christians in the city of Galatia. And throughout this letter he's building an argument. As I said, our passage today is really an illustration that attempts to restate what he's already written. So, as we look at this passage, we have to try to remember where we've been the last few weeks. Fasten your seatbelts, this is going to go quickly:

In chapter 3 we were told that when God promised to bless Abraham, Abraham "believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Galatians 3:6b). Back in Genesis, Abraham puts his trust in God and he is blessed. Then, Paul explains that God's blessing/promise to Abraham was also to his offspring. Paul writes, "The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say 'and to seeds,' meaning many people, but 'and to your seed,' meaning one person, who is Christ" (Galatians 3:16). So, Paul says God's blessing for Abraham is transferred to Christ (pin that).

Now, there's a difference between God's purposes, God's intent for humanity, and laws in Scripture that help limit the impact of human sin. This is what the Mosaic law was. It was a set of laws that marked out Israel as they were established in Moses' era which sought to limit the impact of sin, to keep the people aligned until Abraham's "seed" finally arrived. Paul writes, "The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise" (Galatians 3:17b). The Jewish law doesn't displace the promise. It just served to keep things stable and focused until Jesus arrived. Paul likens it to a teaching/training tool saying, "So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24). The Greek word translated "guardian" here sounds a lot like "pedagogy." It's a caretaker, a guide, a coach, a teacher. The law served as a teacher until the time of Jesus. The law is a bit like training wheels on a bike!

Paul offers another illustration saying, "...as long as an heir is underage, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. The heir is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father" (Galatians 4:1a-2). So also, humanity was under the guidance of the law until we came of age in Christ! We are now able to receive the inheritance set before us!

This is such great news! Paul is ecstatic and can't believe how lucky he is to be alive at this time in God's redemptive history! He's witnessing it all firsthand! But, the church in Galatia doesn't seem to fully appreciate this. They are going back to idolatry! They're re-embracing hollow things! They're attempting to order their lives once again

around a framework meant to keep us on track until they were able to ride free! This is a lot like putting the training wheels back on after you learned to ride a bike. Are you going to take a bike with training wheels down a trail at Palmer Park? Are you going to head to Moab to attempt Porcupine Rim with training wheels? Of course not!!! But that's what they're trying to do. They are picking up training wheels after they came to follow Jesus and encountered the Holy Spirit.

Paul, understandably, is absolutely fed up. He says, OK, fine: "Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise" (Galatians 4:21-23).

So, here's Abraham again. Abraham has been promised God's blessing in his life, God will support Abraham and bring him to a promised land, Abraham will be the father of more offspring than he can count! But as time passes, he and his wife Sarah start to get nervous, and so they come up with their own plan to help God accomplish His plan. Sarah presents Hagar, an Egyptian slave, to Abraham, and she conceives. But this is a child born according to flesh, that is, a child born not of God's supernatural intervention and blessing, but through doubt, lust, and manipulative methods. Eventually, God intervenes, and Sarah does become pregnant with a child that will be the first in the lineage that leads to Jesus. But damage has been done. You can get that full story in Genesis.

Paul continues, then, with his illustration: "These things are being taken figuratively: The women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves [Mt. Sinai = where the Jews received the Mosaic Law]: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother." (Galatians 4:24-26).

OK, Illustration Inception where Paul says there are two covenants. One is all about works-righteousness, it is focused on the Law, which is really just a set of training wheels. It's temporary, it's about doing/saying the right thing at the right time, about eating the right foods and not eating the wrong ones, it's about rituals, it's focused on the earthly desires and logic. *Today, I'm saying it's a lot like me playing American football.* The second covenant is all about God's hand in our lives. It's about fullness of life, eternal things, grace, divine promise, belief in Jesus, freedom. *Picture me running around freely playing soccer with no false starts!*

Paul says, the first covenant is associated with Hagar and her son, with flesh, doubt, lust and human manipulation. Paul warns that the teachers attempting to lead the Galatian church astray are associated with this covenant. The Galatians don't need to practice circumcision and the other aspects of the Jewish law. They should not be observing religious festivals and food restrictions. They aren't



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bound to this covenant because they are in Christ! It's the second covenant which is associated with Sarah and Isaac, the divine promise, the Jerusalem above, the Kingdom of God!

In fact, says Paul, it's like that old passage in Isaiah! *Come on guys! You know the one!:*

"For it is written: "Be glad, barren woman, you who never bore a child shout for joy and cry aloud, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband. Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise" (Galatians 4:24-28).

This reference is a moment when God comforts exiled Israel, where God promises, "I will restore the relationship once again." The barren woman, the desolate woman here is Sarah, the one who was promised to become the mother of nations. So, Paul is claiming that Isaiah's hope for a restored Israel is occurring HERE AND NOW through spiritual descendants who have been grafted in by faith in Jesus, not by flesh/biological descendants. Paul is alerting Galatian Christians to the fact that they are the promised children that Isaiah spoke about. They, the church, are children of the promise, just as WE, the church, are children of the promise today!

Paul ties a bow on his illustration saying, "At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. But what does Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son." Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman" (Galatians 4:29-31).

In Genesis 21, Hagar's son is caught mocking Isaac. The result is that Sarah sends Hagar away (*Now, God doesn't abandon Hagar, He takes care of Hagar and her child and blesses them, but still, they are sent away as they are interfering with this divine promise.*). Likewise, in Galatia, the Judaizers were attempting to saddle Christians with the religious laws focused on fleshly markers of faith (rituals, circumcision, feasts, etc.) and insisted the Galatian Christians needed to play by their rules, to run their routes. Paul reminds the church that they are not beholden to fleshly/external things, but instead are themselves children of the free woman, children of the promise!

But, what's the big deal? What's at stake? Well, a lot more than my decision to play soccer or football, to be sure! For one thing, if they continue down this road, the men are about to experience some very uncomfortable outpatient surgeries, but there's more! This isn't just, some old religious laws about food, getting circumcised, or participating in some festivals. This isn't just, "How am I going to spend an hour of my Sunday morning? With the Paul-following Christians? With the Jewish Christians? With the Presbyterians, the Methodists, or that unaffiliated group? Paul knows that those are just surface level issues; the deeper issues at hand are things like: What gives my life purpose and meaning? Who am I, what must I do in this life, and why does it matter?

Paul's about to say, "If you go down this road... If you allow yourselves to be circumcised, Christ is of no use to you. If you try to live with these religious training wheels on, if you try to live by external/legalistic means. If you live focused on the flesh, you will be lost..."

And Church, it's the same for us today. For starters, just like the Galatian Christians, we're not tied to ritualistic rules/laws in order to know and follow God. We do not run toward legalism. Jesus came to fulfill the Law, to accomplish all that needed to happen in that framework so we might enter into the covenant, the relationship, of grace as children of the divine promise.

Friends, our own culture is still wrestling with questions of purpose and meaning. "Who am I? What must I do in this life? Why does it matter?" And our society claims to have all the answers. Those enslaved by the flesh tell us we must play by their rules to thrive, belong, to be successful. Our culture doesn't live by the Mosaic Law, but we certainly have our own cultural "laws/norms" both spoken and unspoken which prescribe how to get the most out of life. Again, our culture isn't particularly concerned with what God wants for us, but calls us to pursue a host of conflicting ideologies in order to really live. In order to get the most out of life. In order to live a life worth living.

Depending on what circles you run in, these ideologies can come with various names: Hyper-Individualism? Being "True to yourself above all else-ism?" Liberalism? Conservatism? Hustle/Get-Money/Ladder-Climb-ism?. Whatever it is, each of these has its own set of rules/rituals/statements of faith/external actions that one is to follow in order to experience full-life.

But these are ideologies of the flesh, to which we are not subject! We are children of the promise who have freedom in Christ! We're not measured by, filled by, fulfilled by, satisfied with the things of the flesh. They are fleeting and hollow. We are children of the promise, we belong to the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, the King over all creation. As we are bound to Christ, we live confidently knowing if we have surrendered ourselves to the Lord, if we are in Christ we are free to live fully, that is, to love God and love others, to glorify God and enjoy him forever. And, as Paul writes in Ephesians, "to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2:10b)

Friends, if you are in Christ, you are no longer a slave but a child of the promise. Again, Jesus's invitation throughout the Gospels is to follow him. To lay down your chains and to start walking with Him. We are not children of the slave woman, but of the free promise.

Jesus has freed us from legalistic religion. Jesus has freed us from cultural tribalism. Jesus invites us to follow Him. To step into grace. To experience the loving embrace of the Father. To join a new family, the family of the promise.

Let us not settle for anything less.

