

Don't Forfeit your Freedom

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[0:00] Well, please do take your seats and turn with me in your Bibles to Galatians chapter 4. Hopefully you can find one of the blue church Bibles underneath the chair in front of you.

If you're in one of those blue Bibles, you can find that on page 974, Galatians chapter 4. We're going to read from verse 8 through to verse 1 of chapter 5.

Galatians chapter 4, reading from verse 8. Let us hear God's word together. Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not God's.

But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years.

I'm afraid I may have labored over you in vain. Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong. You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God as Christ Jesus.

[1:43] What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me. Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ has formed in you. I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you. Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise.

Now this may be interpreted allegorically. These women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. She is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia. She corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written, Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear! Break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband. Now you, brothers like Isaac, are children of promise.

But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say?

Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman. So, brothers, we are not children of the slave, but of the free woman. For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.

[4:17] This is God's Word. Please keep that passage open in front of you. Let us pray for his help with that as we turn to it together. The grass withers and the flower fades, but your Word, O Lord, stands forever.

Lord, we pray that you would speak to us now through this eternal Word by the power of your Spirit. Lord, that you would form Christ in us, that you would cause us to trust on him and in him alone.

And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. As I'm sure most of you will know, we have been working through in our mornings, haven't we, the book of Exodus.

It's a wonderful story, isn't it, where we see the once enslaved Israelites, freed from the land of their oppressors, that they are led into freedom and towards the promised land.

It is, isn't it, that story? It's a kind of beautiful prototype of the salvation, the redemption that God would win for his people on the cross, where all those who have put their faith in Jesus would be similarly delivered from their slavery to sin and death, being given freedom from those great enemies and set out on a journey towards an even greater promised land.

[5:47] The book of Exodus doesn't only foreshadow that the deliverance that God would win for his people, it also foreshadows the fickleness of the people who God redeemed.

We've seen this in the kind of weeks gone by. Before they were even out of the land, on the shores of the Red Sea, on the very cusp of freedom, the people of Israel cried out to the Lord through Moses, what have you done in bringing us up out of the land of Egypt?

Is this not what we said to you in Egypt? Leave us alone, that we might serve the Egyptians. If only you left us alone in slavery.

Now surely we might have thought the people's heart would change once they were across the Red Sea, once they were finally free and their enemies utterly destroyed. But, I don't know if you remember this, it was just three days into freedom in Exodus 16, when we heard the people again, the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses.

And the people of Israel said, Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pot and ate bread to the fool, for you have brought us out into the wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.

[7:09] Days, right? Just days into freedom. And they are looking back, aren't they, at the past with rose-tinted glasses, longing for the supposed good old days of slavery.

And that is a tale that just continues throughout the Israelites' journey to the promised land, as they wait for the consummation of God's promise, as they wait to enter the promised land.

We hear them again and again, pine, after the supposedly good old days of slavery. Get it again, Numbers 11, all that we had meat to eat. Right? We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, the garlic.

But now we have nothing but this manna to look at. If you're wondering why we're starting a sermon on Galatians 4 in Exodus and Numbers, it's because that is exactly where the Galatians were.

They might have been separated by more than a thousand years, but they were really in the very same place. One last quote from Numbers 14, verse 3. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?

[8:25] Would it not be better for us to go back to slavery? It's so easy, isn't it, for us to hear those cries of a freed people longing for slavery and think how incredibly foolish.

And that's not wrong. It is incredibly foolish. But the problem is, the problem that the Galatians were finding out, and the problem we need to be aware of, is that the Israelites in the wilderness, they had the same kind of hearts that we have.

Hearts that are prone to look to the past, thinking it was far better than it ever was. Hearts that are prone to look for not the right path, or the good path, but the easy path.

Hearts that are prone to live by sight, and not by faith. The Galatians were finding out the hard way that they had the same heart problem as God's people of old.

And for them, the potentially deadly infection had spread dangerously far. So that as we've heard through this letter, Paul's kind of surgical scalpel has had to dig painfully deep at points to try and root out the rot that was setting in.

[9:57] And we just heard in our reading there that it is a surgery that Paul himself finds painful to carry out, doesn't he? I wish I could change my tone. Our passage this evening is a passionate plea from a pain-filled pastor having to do some painful surgery as he does all that he can to cut out a spreading infection in the Galatian churches before it was too late.

Now for us here this evening, perhaps, I hope, perhaps, that the roots of this heart problem have not penetrated quite as deep as they had for the Galatians.

But so long as there is sin in our hearts, there will be a seedling of this very problem that constantly needs to be pruned, of a heart that hearkens back to the days of our slavery to sin and thinks maybe that was better.

We've got two points this evening, two pleas from Paul to all of God's people. Don't turn back to slavery, but instead stand firm in the freedom Christ has freed you for.

Those two points really are very much just two sides of the same coin. But in the first part of the passage, verse 8 to 20 there, the focus is on the past. Don't return to the slavery from which you

once came before the focus shifts forward in verse 21 to 31.

[11:29] Stand firm in the present so that you'll obtain God's promised inheritance in the future. So let's start then by looking back, point one, don't turn back to slavery.

Just look there with me at verse 8, where Paul writes, formerly, that is looking back, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.

That is the life the Galatians once lived, a life of slavery to gods who were not really gods. And we get a glimpse of that in Acts 14. You can look at it later on if you want, but the people of Lystra, it's a Galatian city where Paul was, the people of Lystra tried to offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas, thinking they were Zeus and Hermes, because they had healed a lame man by the power of the Spirit.

Paul and Barnabas had to do all that they could just to barely restrain these people from worshipping the two of them as gods. That is the religion that Galatian churches were once enslaved to.

But look at what he is saying in verse 8, kind of paired with the end of verse 9. Formerly, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.

[12:56] Second half of verse 9, how can you turn back again to the worthless elementary principles of the world? That is a really striking thing for Paul to say.

Because if you've been with us through this series in Galatians, well, what is it that the Galatians were threatening to turn towards? It wasn't Zeus, was it?

It was the Old Testament law as a means of attaining righteousness. Now, it's tempting to think, isn't it? Surely, right, surely one of those is better than the other.

Better to be believing in just one God than many gods. Better to be in the Bible than nothing at all. But Paul says, with staggeringly little fuss, offering sacrifices to random people you think might be Zeus, and zealously trying to keep the law to gain a right standing before God, again, are actually just two sides of the same coin.

Because behind the exterior is the one and the same false gospel. Earn divine favor through your actions.

[14:27] One might look much more like Christianity than the other, but both, Paul says, are religions of slavery that depend on works to earn a favorable standing before a divine being.

What Paul is implying here is potentially shocking, but it's very simple. It is no better to be a Muslim who believes in one God than a Hindu who believes in many gods.

It is no better to be a Jehovah's Witness who uses a loose translation of the Bible than a Sikh who has no interest in it at all. It is no better to be a Roman Catholic than a pagan or an atheist.

That means your Catholic colleague and your friend who is into crystals, they stand equally enslaved to the elementary principles of this world and both need the same freedom from that slavery that is only found in the one true gospel of Jesus Christ, where righteousness comes through faith alone, in Christ alone, and nothing else.

a gospel that is grounded not in our action, but in God. See how Paul presses that point home at the start of verse 9? It is true that the Galatians have come to know God, but it is more important to understand they have been known by God.

[15:58] God is the one who is active in the story of salvation. We heard, didn't we, this morning from the holiday club team, didn't we? We receive salvation from God through faith in Christ.

It is God who earns it for us. But the Galatians were flirting with a return to slavery. A return to a religion that said, we will take on a kind of contributory role in our salvation.

But friends, such a path leads to nothing other than slavery. In seeking to earn favor with God through any of our work, we load ourselves with a burden that is far too great for us to bear.

And so, we are inevitably crushed by the weight of sin, crushed by the law we have placed ourselves under as it exposes our inability to even contribute just a little righteousness to our standing before God.

And so, Paul pleads with this church, he pleads with them that they would not turn back to slavery but would instead, verse 12, become like him.

[17:21] Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am for I also have become as you are. One who no longer lived under the law, we saw it in chapter 2, didn't we?

Paul, ready to go and eat with the Gentiles who became as they were because he knows he is free from living under the law, under its curse, he lives free of its burden and here he begs the Galatians

to follow in his own footsteps even though he is a Jew.

He urges them to follow in his footsteps just as they once did. He recounts their blessedness there in verse 13 and 14, how they so warmly embraced him, how they received him with all warmth that they would have received Christ himself with despite his ailments.

But now, now the church that was at one time ready to gouge out their own eyes for Paul, it's a vivid image isn't it? The church that was ready to gouge out their own eyes for him, they were now ready to turn their back on him.

Why? The answer is there in verse 17. They, that is the false teachers, they make much of you.

[18:46] Now Paul says in the next verse that's not a problem in itself. It is always good to be made much of for a good reason, right? It's been good to be made much of if the good is people perceiving Christ being formed in you.

But not everyone who makes much of you wants what is good for you. There's a big difference, isn't there, between a husband complimenting his wife because he wants her to know that she's beautiful and a stranger complimenting a woman at the bar because he wants to sleep with her. Two compliments, two people being made much of but with very different goals in mind. One sees a person to be honoured for another's sake, the other sees an object to be used for their own sake.

The false teachers in Galatia were coming in and making much of the Galatians but they saw them as objects to be used for their own sake. The problem is that even though the compliments were coming from people with wicked motives, the Galatians were all too ready to listen.

Now again, it's always easy in hindsight to see the folly of those who are on the cusp of forfeiting their freedom. We heard the cries of the Israelites in the wilderness longing for the good old days of slavery.

[20:16] We're hearing in this book the same cry in the hearts of the Galatians. A church that had their bonds broken, that had been set free, they are now marching back through the prison doors.

They are picking up the chains they had been freed from and wrapping them back around their wrists. And we can see, can't we, watching from a distance that it is so incredibly foolish.

but how ready are we to be praised by people? How much do we crave people's approval?

We might rightly recognize their foolishness, but we must also recognize that we share their weakness, don't we? wanting to be made much of, whatever the reason.

We don't have a circumcision party, do we, wandering around, but we do have people whose praise we want. There will be people in your lives who you are desperate to speak well of you.

[21:30] But if their praise becomes our motivation, and their praise is not grounded in the gospel, then we are heading down a very slippery slope that the Galatians have come to realize is very hard to get off.

You take up a lot of Sunday shifts to please your boss. you choose to go to the pub over the prayer meeting so that your non-Christian friends will think better of you.

You take part in crude conversations at work so that your colleagues will think you're good crack.

There are so many ways, aren't there, that we are tempted towards the praise of people who have no interest in seeing Christ formed in us.

But the further into the people-pleasing orbits you go, the stronger and stronger its gravitational pool becomes, and the further and faster you will be drawn away from the gospel of freedom and back to the elementary principles of this world that leave you enslaved to sin.

The path that takes us back into slavery we need to remember it is one that people will be ready to praise you for taking. But there is only one good reason to be praised and that is when we are made much of for Christ being formed in us.

[23:07] So Paul pleads with the Galatians not to return to slavery and we would do well in to heed that call and to make sure we do all that we can to avoid any step in that direction.

Paul pleads with them not to return to slavery however tempting the words of flattery might make such a path seem. Now that is where he begins and then towards the end of this chapter he turns and urges them instead to stand firm in their freedom.

Our second and final point this evening stand firm in the freedom that Christ has freed you for. Over the last couple of chapters Paul has gone back time and again to the law hasn't he?

We've seen that a number of times sometimes kind of zooming in on the law as given to God's people at Sinai other times just speaking more generally of the Torah the kind of first five books of the Bible.

It is that latter kind of broader sense that Paul comes back to the law here in verse 21 and from there he gives another example really of the point he has been pressing deeper and deeper into as this letter has gone on.

[24 : 25] I'm sure by this point in Galatians we know that God had made a promise to Abraham to make of him a great nation and to bless the nations through his offspring.

It's certainly obvious isn't it to say that for that to happen Abraham needed offspring but for many many years Abraham had no such offspring so that by the time he was 86 and his wife Sarah 75 they felt the need to take matters into their own hands and attain God's blessing through their action.

Sarah had a slave her name was Hagar the Old Testament is always real which means it's really pretty Hagar was given to Abraham that she might bear a child who Abraham could call his son but it was a child born not according to faith and a promise but works of the flesh and all I think Paul wants us to see really in verse 22 and 23 there is that there are two things that are true of Ishmael and there are two things that are true of Isaac two things that are true of Ishmael that is the son born to Hagar one he was born according to the works of the flesh two because his mother was a slave he was born into slavery those two things were true of Ishmael and the reverse was true of Isaac first of all he was a child born according to God's promise secondly he was free having been born of a free woman that I think is all that

Paul is saying there in verse 22 and 23 and his point is simply that even at the very beginning of the law you can perceive the outline of a pattern that repeats itself again and again through the pages of scripture that is what he's saying verse 24 when he says this can be interpreted allegorically not that he's kind of decided to stick fresh meaning onto the text that has never been there before there's nothing kind of inventive about Paul's allegorical interpretation of Sarah and Hagar all these things that this is the first wave in a pattern that we see repeatedly wash up on the shores of scripture works and slavery faith and freedom they go together because read on a few more pages and we get that same pattern again there's the same blessing of promise held forth to God's people at Sinai not just Abraham now but a whole nation and again there are two paths the people might choose to take one in which the people might work to earn God's blessing another in which by faith they wait to receive God's blessing according to his promise trusting that he will fulfill his word in time that is the second wave and then Paul rolls further on still to his own day to the time of the Galatians and says here is that very same pattern again there is a present Jerusalem Paul says you go to Jerusalem early in the first century what we see in the gospels right it is what Sky was reading for us from earlier people who rely on something in themselves for their right standing before God you go to Paul's present day Jerusalem and you will see the same thing again people trying to gain God's blessing not through faith but through their works just like Abraham with Hagar just like the Israelites at Sinai so too with the Judaizers arriving in Galatia from Jerusalem in Paul's day that is Paul's point in verse 24 and 25 and the pattern tells us that where works of the flesh are relied upon slavery is always standing alongside follow that pattern follow the path the way of works and you will find yourself bound in chains bound to your burdens tied to your sin and guilt!

[28 : 57] But Paul says verse 26 there is another pattern another drumbeat to march to because there is another Jerusalem not on earth but in heaven the Jerusalem above is free and she is our mother for it is written rejoice O barren one who does not bear break forth and cry aloud you who are not in labor for the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband Paul's quoting there from Isaiah chapter 54 a passage which anticipates that the barren bride of God bearing a great multitude of people who spread across the whole world who fill every city and what does Paul say in the next verse you

Galatians are fulfilling this prophecy so long as you don't return to slavery you brothers and sisters like Isaac are children of promise he's getting to see that although the heavenly Jerusalem might appear weak in the present they themselves so long as they don't return to slavery they just like us today are in fact a fulfillment of those very words in Isaiah 54 moving towards a city of God that will be far more glorious than the earthly Jerusalem has ever been or ever will be there is a future inheritance awaiting the children of promise that far outweighs anything this world could ever offer and so we are left again with the question why would the Galatians not stand firm in the present if that glorious hope is waiting for the future why would you do anything but stand firm we saw that they might be tempted to turn back for the sake of human praise now we see that they might not stand firm in order to avoid human persecution verse 29 just as at that time he who was born

according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the spirit so also it is now right back in that very first little wave that washed up there was the foreshadowing of persecution for the children of promise it's an incredibly kind of brief account we get but Genesis 21 kind of tells us something of the conflict that existed between the child of slavery and the child of promise from the very earliest days and Paul is not saying that what happens there whatever that might have entailed was a kind of like for like persecution that repeats itself through history his point again is that right from the beginning that has been the pattern so that there would have been and will still be a temptation to give in because we can and should always expect the children of promise to endure some kind of persecution but what does the scripture say verse 30 no case for compromise cast out the slave woman and her son for she shall not inherit with the son of the free woman there is no fence to straddle that there is no kind of middle ground to take up there is an inheritance for the son of the free woman but nothing for the children of the slave to re-embrace slavery is to disinherit yourself from the kingdom of God it is to hand over the keys of salvation to give up the blessing of God in eternity in exchange for relief from man for a moment now again we don't do we have people prowling the isles of bon accord every Sunday convincing us to get circumcised and that is that is something to be thankful for but circle back with me to the very beginning of our passage this evening who are the sons of Ishmael that might persecute the children of promise who are the sons of slavery it is those who preach salvation through works of the law but it is also isn't it all those who are enslaved to the elementary principles of the world Paul started this passage by telling us actually they were all in the same camp all of those who are not free in Christ are sons of slavery and so as good as it is that we don't have people trying to persuade us to be circumcised there are many more sons of slavery who will persecute the children of promise whether severely or just subtly there will always be those who make the life difficult for children of freedom so that we might be tempted to not stand firm but give!

to seek refuge from the pain or the shame that they cost their words and actions and it is a temptation isn't it because it might well make life a little bit more comfortable for a moment disagreeing disagreeing with what the Bible teaches on sex or abortion might make life easier at work next week drinking too much on a night out might mean you don't get made fun of by your classmates not spending time in your Bible at home might help you avoid the ridicule of your family but making decisions on the basis of what will keep you free from persecution is again isn't it it's just the first few steps down the slippery slope that the Galatians have found themselves sliding dangerously far down but Paul says the inheritance of God's promise is entered into by the children of promise who cast out those who would drag them back into slavery not heeding their message not listening to their gospel not living for their praise not living to avoid their persecution not returning to whatever elementary principles they might preach but instead verse 5 of chapter 1 standing firm because it is for freedom it's for freedom that Christ has set you free stand firm then and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery that is that is the message of this passage in a nutshell and it is a message that every single one of us here this evening needs to take to heart because we have the same heart as God's people have throughout history one that is prone to the same error one that longs for the same praise one that often wants to avoid the very same persecution we have this heart problem and so we need to heed this warning so that we would stand firm stand firm in the freedom that Christ has freed us for it is for freedom

[37 : 41] Christ has freed you for stand firm therefore and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery let us pray that those words would describe each and every one of us here this evening that we might receive what we could never earn and be free from the shackles we can never shake off let us pray that will be the case before we respond in song together father we do we rejoice that it's for freedom that Christ has set us free but Lord we know that there is sin in our own hearts that sometimes looks back at slavery and in our foolishness thinks those days were perhaps better Lord we ask that you would root out that sin in our own hearts Lord that you would help us to know the glorious freedom of the gospel to remember the misery of the sin in which we once walked and were chained to to know the wonderful hope the amazing grace that has set us free from those shackles

Lord we pray that you would help us to stand firm in the gospel not to live for human praise nor to do all that we can to avoid human persecution but instead in whatever season whatever it might cost us that we would hold fast firmly to the one true gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ Lord we thank you for that gospel we pray for any here this evening who do not yet know it as their own Lord that

they would come to you in faith and in faith alone and so be completely and utterly set free that they might have life in Christ in whose precious name we pray Amen may may may