



Galatians 2:1–10

2nd Message

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# THE STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM

*SERIES: GALATIANS - JOURNEY FROM LAW TO FREEDOM*

In his book *A View from the Zoo*, Gary Richmond tells a story about a time when he worked at a zoo and was assigned to care for a cage of fifteen red-tailed hawks in the health center.<sup>1</sup> The birds had been caught illegally and were in captivity for evidence in a court trial. The birds had been there a long time and were destined to die at the zoo.

Gary didn't think this situation was right, and so he decided to let them go. One day while his supervisors were at a meeting, he unlocked the cage, opened the door, and left. An hour later he returned to see what had happened, and to his amazement the birds were still in the cage. He went into the cage making noise and waving his arms to inspire them to freedom. The birds flew outside the cage but landed ten feet away. Gary left again. When he returned fifteen minutes later he found that none of the birds had left and some had wandered back into the cage. Finally, Gary gave up. Captivity was apparently more comfortable than freedom.

Freedom sounds wonderful and kindles deep desires. But freedom isn't automatic and doesn't come naturally. We can come to Christ, attend church, join a bible study, but it isn't easy to leave conditioned patterns and ways of thinking behind even when Jesus has opened the cage door.

If freedom were natural, it would be inevitable. But it is not inevitable. Not all lives are free. Many persons do not experience freedom at all as they go from childhood to adulthood; they only exchange determinisms. Dependency on parent is exchanged for dependency on a spouse. Addiction to the breast is exchanged for addiction to alcohol or drugs. The fear of parental authority is exchanged for the fear of peer disapproval. Anxiety over losing the securities of the familiar is exchanged for anxieties that provoke paralysis in face of any change or danger. Spontaneities never occur. Motives never develop. Dreams are never accepted; challenges, never met.<sup>2</sup>

Freedom is the theme of our summer series in Galatians, #free2live; "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal 5:1 ESV). But there is a serious threat to freedom, and that threat is living under the law, legalism. Living under the law means relating to God by rules and regulations through external performance. Life in Christ is defined by what we can't do, what we need to think, the right ways to do things. The dynamic of this system filters down into all our relationships, as we talked about last week. We look for acceptance and identity and love through what we do.

Jesus ushered in a new era of relating to God as his beloved, and living as a new creation through grace and Spirit. The Spirit empowers us to be transformed deeply and to love extravagantly, something law cannot do. But experiencing freedom is a battle, because we are always in danger of going back to the law. This was the case in the early church. The issue then was whether Gentiles who believed in Jesus had to come under Torah—circumcision, food laws, and holy days. The issues today are different, but freedom from law is still a struggle. Today I want highlight Paul's story and then reflect on why freedom is so hard.

## Paul's Story

We learn a lot about Paul in the book of Galatians, more than in any other letter. What we learn is that Paul stood firm against many in the early church who were teetering on the verge of going back to Torah. Paul shares this story to give historical support for this theological argument. Let me highlight the key elements that Paul shares.

First, Paul was instructed in gospel understanding and commissioned to preach to the Gentiles, not through human agency, but by revelation.

**For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (Gal 1:11–12)**

It was important for the Galatians to understand this. Paul's calling and authority came from Jesus. He had primary source information. Therefore, his word had more weight than the Jewish agitators who were causing the Galatians to desert the gospel and live under Torah.

Second, Paul did not seek the advice of the apostles or try to insert himself in leadership immediately. Rather he went to Arabia and spent time in solitude for three years letting his understanding of the gospel soak in.

**I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia. (Gal 1:16–17)**

Paul stayed quiet. He needed this time to gain deep understanding and firm convictions that would be necessary for the challenges that lay ahead. This is always a good pattern for young people who feel called into ministry. The more time you take to learn in secret the more effective you will be for

God's kingdom. And this is a good reminder for all of us—we need regular times of silence and solitude.

Third, Paul went to Jerusalem after three years, but he only talked to Peter and James, the Lord's brother.

**Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. (Gal 1:18–19)**

Paul's goal on this visit was simply to build a relationship with Peter, not to lecture him or push an agenda with the apostles. Paul was content to stay hidden. The agitators could not claim to the Galatians that Paul was seeking prominence and power. After this visit Paul, left Judea and went to Syria and Cilicia to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

Fourth, after fourteen years Paul went to Jerusalem again. But this visit was much different. Things started heating up.

**Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles. (Gal 2:1–2)**

The reason for Paul's visit was based on a revelation. Some see this visit as a reference to the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 and indeed what happens is similar but Paul certainly would have referred to the results of the Council if it had taken place. More than likely this is a reference to Acts 11 where we read that Agabus had a revelation that there would be a famine. Paul and Barnabas were sent from Antioch to bring money for a relief effort.

Two things happened on this visit. First, some sneaked-in false brethren tried to force Titus, a Gentile, to be circumcised.

**But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. (Gal 2:3–5)**

We see that Paul held his ground. He did not yield. He did not submit to those of the circumcision party. Imagine the courage this would have taken in the presence of all the apostles. Why was Paul so bold? He knew that the truth of the gospel was at stake. Notice the word freedom in contrast to slavery. Jesus and the Spirit are freedom. Law is slavery.

Second, the apostles gave Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship.

**When James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. (Gal 2:9)**

Paul had waited at least seventeen years before sharing his Gentile ministry with the apostles. Now finally the apostles affirmed and endorsed Paul's ministry.

But the battle was far from over. The next event Paul shares is a major confrontation with Peter.

**But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. (Gal 2:11–12)**

Peter came to Antioch and Paul got in his face. The issue? A Jew eating with unclean Gentiles, something that Torah prohibited. Remember what happened to Peter in Acts 10; God gave him a vision, brought him to Cornelius, and many Gentiles believed and received the Holy Spirit. Peter embraced the new age and was free to eat with Gentiles.

But then certain men came from James, the circumcision party, who said you had to be circumcised to be saved. Peter withdrew and stopped eating with Gentiles. Why? Peter feared the disapproval of these men. He was afraid to stand up to them. He did not want to be the odd man out.

And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (Gal 2:13–14)

Peter's actions were contagious and affected many other Jews. Even Barnabas was carried away in this hypocrisy, asking others to do what they were not doing. Unlike Peter, Paul was not afraid. He confronted Peter in public. And again, the issue was the truth of the gospel. Peter was not walking straight or upright. This confrontation then led to the Jerusalem Council that is recorded in Acts 15. If it had not been for Paul, who knows what would have happened.

### Why Freedom is So Hard

The story of Paul and the early church tells us how difficult it can be to live out freedom in Christ and how easy it is to live under law. The pull of legalism is so powerful. If Peter and Barnabas had trouble, then we should expect that we too are in for a battle. Why is freedom so hard? Let me suggest some things.

### The Power of the Group

Whether we grow up in a church or start attending a church later, we naturally want to conform to how the group functions. We learn the rules or ways of doing things. We conform to the theological framework. The traditions are deeply entrenched. We want to belong and fit in. We have a need for acceptance and we fear disapproval. We don't want to stand alone. We don't risk asking questions. Slowly, we lose touch with the life of Jesus. The excitement of the Spirit fades, and our spiritual

life dries up. Without thinking, we become a slave of law. This is exactly what was happening in Jerusalem with Peter and others.

The power of a group is illustrated by a test conducted by a psychologist. Groups of ten teenagers were brought into a room. Each group was instructed to raise their hands when the teacher pointed to the longest line on three separate charts. Each chart contained three lines of different lengths. What one person in the group did not know was that nine of the others in the room had been instructed ahead of time to vote for the second-longest line.

During the experiments the stooge would typically glance around, frown in the confusion and slip his hand up with the group. Time after time, the self-conscious stooge would sit there saying a short line is longer than a long line, simply because he lacked the courage to challenge the group. This remarkable conformity occurred in about seventy-five percent of the cases.

We all know the power of the group to influence our behavior, whether we are teenagers or adults. We don't want to voice a different opinion in business meetings when everyone else is in agreement. You might be surprised to know that pastors and elders sometimes have the same problem.

### **The Need for Control**

As I said last week, the church can be a breeding ground for high-control leaders. Leaders feel the need to keep people in line. They don't give the freedom to ask questions or have differences of opinion. They don't want change. They are threatened by gifted people. In the early church, those of the circumcision party sought to control the Jerusalem leaders by putting Gentile believers under Torah. This dynamic has been repeated throughout church history.

Many years ago, I started a bible study on the University of Nebraska campus. I had no idea what I was doing, but 50 or 60 students were showing up. I was so excited. One day I got a visit from a campus ministry group delegation. They made it clear that the campus was their territory and that I should curtail my activities. They were concerned I would detract from the number of people attending their group. I was stunned by this mentality. But it is all too common.

There are people who do not want us to be free. They don't want us to be free before God, accepted just as we are by his grace. They don't want us to be free to express our faith originally and creatively in the world. They want to control us; they want to use us for their own purposes. They themselves refuse to live arduously and openly in faith, but huddle together with a few others and try to get a sense of approval in insisting that all look alike, talk alike and act alike, thus validating one another's worth.<sup>3</sup>

### **Can-do Attitude**

Living under law appeals to our desire to perform. Religious performance is intensified by our culture of performance,

ethnic background, or family-of-origin dynamic. As I said last week, I am a legalistic person. I want to keep the rules. Just tell me what I need to do. I think I should be able to do it. I naturally want to earn and perform.

The problem with this mentality is that we depend on the flesh. As a Christian, the flesh might want to be religious. But the flesh is hostile to God and can't please God. The flesh is anti-God. So you can listen to a sermon. You can commit yourself to obedience in some way. But if you invoke the flesh with your can-do attitude, it will fail.

This is the problem with perfectionism. We try to perfect ourselves through our own strength and abilities. But there is no room or place for failure. We are hard on ourselves and we judge others. We become slaves of law and don't experience freedom and joy. Do you think God expects you to be perfect? No. We are moving in that direction, and one day we will be like Jesus, but God wants you to be totally dependent on him, even when you fail.

### **Prefer Law to Total Surrender**

Living under the law can appeal to us because we can keep God at a distance. We want rules that we can manage without surrendering all of our heart. We want to stay in control of our lives. This was the mentality of the Pharisees: "what do I have to do to inherit eternal life? Who is my neighbor?" They wanted clear lines and definitions. They wanted to know the course requirements. And we want the same thing, simply to fulfill the basics, the minimum. We don't want to go all out and love enemies or people that are marginal. We don't want to love a difficult family member or an unreasonable boss.

This is often the problem in marriage. We want a system of rules and obligations. We don't want to give all of our heart. We want to stay in control. But marriage requires extravagant, sacrificial love, a total surrender of oneself for the good of the other, way beyond what we vowed to do on our wedding day. And that is what God wants, a life of total surrender to the Spirit.

### **Mindset for Freedom**

What will help us in our struggle against living under law and experiencing freedom? I don't want to give you a formula, but just three things that are important to keep in mind.

### **Courage to stand firm**

"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Gal 5:1)

Paul's story can be a tremendous encouragement to us. There are situations where we must stand firm, even if it means conflict. When we live in freedom we can have the courage to speak when we are outnumbered or when we are faced with strong leaders who want to use their powerful personalities to control us. We pray for the courage to stand firm.

### Totally embrace the new

Some of the Jewish leaders couldn't abandon the old to totally embrace life in the Spirit. We can have the same problem. We have to be all-in and stay all-in. We have to dive into the deep end rather than wade in the baby pool. We can't afford to dabble, settle for a mix of freedom and law. We can't afford to pick and choose. That mentality will just not work. We have to keep moving on the journey from law to freedom. It is so easy to stagnate, but to stay put or stop is to surrender to slavery.

### Confidence in the truth of the gospel

What gave Paul such confidence and boldness to meet the challenges he faced was his deep understanding of the gospel.

For Paul it was all about the truth of the gospel. Starting in verse 2:14 Paul begins a detailed theological explanation of the gospel through the lens of Israel's story. The gospel is much more than Jesus dying for our sins. Jesus was the focal point of the whole story of the Bible. We are invited to join the story. When we see the magnitude and beauty of what God has done, then we are much more likely to live in freedom.

1. Gary Richmond, *A View from the Zoo*, (Waco TX Word Books 1987)
2. Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light*, (Colorado Springs Helmers & Howard 1988), 21
3. Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 67

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