



# THE APOSTLE OF FREEDOM

SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM

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Galatians 1:10-24  
Third Message  
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I have an 80 year-old uncle who lives on a ranch in western Nebraska. My uncle has been raising cattle all of his life. His face is weathered from the sun. He has a wry smile. Every time I see him he has a few stories and jokes to tell me. His right thumb doesn't work. When I shake hands with him, I have to wedge my hand between his thumb and fingers. He gets up at the crack of dawn every day and works for a couple of hours before breakfast. He has a big meal at noon, and then takes a nap. He is a voracious reader and he knows more about history than anyone I know. Often he reads far into the night. When a government agency wanted to study irrigation, they came to see my uncle, because he was one of the first ranchers to use circle irrigation. For the past few years he has been fighting cancer, but he is still working the land and taking cows to market. Every year he has a cattle drive to bring his stock in from the hills. When I think about my uncle, I think of how unique he is. There is only one Orrin Marcy. He isn't a copy. He is an original.

Sadly, we live in a world of copies. It seems the majority of people want to be like someone else. We are influenced in the way we dress, our hairstyles, what kind of cars we drive, the books we read. Originals are hard to come by. But in the Bible we encounter many unique and original people. In the New Testament in particular there is one original who really gets our attention. I am referring to the apostle Paul. Our text today from the book of Galatians will show how true this is.

We have already seen that the theme of Galatians is freedom. The opposite of freedom — living under the law — we learned, is being controlled by anybody or anything other than the Spirit of God. It is a "copy" mentality — behavior that is defined by external standards for the sake of appearances. The issue is control. We have talked about how control manifests itself in church, in marriage, and among families.

In the opening verses of chapter 1 Paul expressed his amazement that the Galatians, quoting the apostle, "are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel." The Galatians were being controlled by agitators and troublemakers who had convinced them that they had to submit to the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, i.e., they had to be circumcised and keep certain days holy. These agitators were spreading lies about God, the one who had rescued the Galatians from this present evil age. Paul had a harsh word for such troublemakers: "But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, *let him be accursed*" (Gal 1:8).

As we continue our study today, the focus is on the

apostle, who offers himself as an example of one who had been liberated from the law. What was it that freed Paul from Jewish legalism and led him to preach the message of freedom? We begin reading in verse 10 of chapter 1, which marks the transition between the introduction and the section that follows. I will read the text, make some comments, and then draw spiritual application for our lives.

**For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still striving to please men, I would not be a bond servant of Christ (Gal 1:10, NASB).**

Paul's opponents had questioned the apostle's motivation in their efforts to discredit his message, saying that he was a man-pleaser. The apostle's question anticipates his opponents' attempts to discredit his strong stand against their teaching on circumcision. Was he seeking the favor of the Galatians or of God? he asks. He answers by saying that it is impossible to please men and serve God at the same time. His motivation for his life and ministry comes from being a servant of Christ. Paul wonders how the Galatians could view him as a man-pleaser when his word "accursed," used to pronounce judgment on the false teachers, is so harsh. Notice, however, that he uses the word "still" — "If I were still striving to please men." This indicates that at a certain time in his life Paul was indeed a man-pleaser.

The lesson is obvious: If man-pleasing is our goal, we are living under law. We will never be an original.

Next, the apostle goes on to explain how he came to have such a message of freedom as is found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Verses 11-12:

**For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.**

Paul's gospel was "not according to man." It did not come through tradition or through the educational process, but rather by means of a revelation of Jesus Christ. Paul had a supernatural experience on the Damascus road, and at some point he received a special revelation.

Verses 11 and 12 relate back to verse 1, where Paul states that his apostleship was "not sent from man, nor through the agency of men, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead." His apostleship was God-appointed, and his message God-revealed. The gospel that he taught was not his idea, nor was it man's idea; it was God's idea. This statement will be key to his countering the propaganda of the agitators. Paul is establishing the point that the gospel that he was pro-

claiming came from God himself. It was source information. It was not made up or manufactured through human agency. Thus the gospel is without human error, and it cannot be changed.

Paul now goes on to verify and validate the authenticity of his message by sharing with the Galatians his own story. Verses 13-14:

**For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church beyond measure, and tried to destroy it; and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.**

There were five stages to Paul's spiritual journey. First, we will look at his focus before his conversion (verses 13, 14). Concerning the church, he had dedicated himself to persecuting and destroying it. Concerning Judaism, he was advancing beyond his contemporaries. In both of these areas Paul was a fanatic. He was persecuting the church beyond measure. He went from house to house in Jerusalem, seizing Christians and dragging them off to prison. He was not just persecuting the church, he was trying to stamp it out. He was equally fanatical in his enthusiasm for Jewish tradition, outstripping many of his Jewish contemporaries. King Arthur's comment on an aged Guenever in T. H. White's final volume of his story of King Arthur describes the apostle at this stage of his life: "She never cared for God. She was a good theologian, but that was all" (quoted by Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 48). Paul was religious, but he was not spiritual. He was a bigot and a fanatic. No conditioned reflex or other psychological device could convert a man in that state. Only God could reach him, and that is what happened.

Verses 15-16a describe the second stage of the apostle's journey.

**But when He who had set me apart, even from my mother's womb, and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles,**

Paul's conversion was remarkable. He uses three words to describe the actions of God. First, God was "pleased to reveal His Son in me." God determined or consented to do this. Second, God "set him apart from his mother's womb." He appointed him. And third, God "called" him. "It is significant that Paul did not describe this moment by saying, "When I decided to be a Christian," but rather he says, "When he...was pleased to reveal his Son in me." Conversion is God's work.

Paul says that God had a special mission for him, and that was to "preach Him among the Gentiles." We are reminded of the words of Jeremiah: "Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations'" (Jer 1:4-5). Certainly Paul saw himself in such a prophetic role to bring the gospel to the Gentiles.

Stage three was Paul's initial training, his boot camp experience, as it were (16b-17):

**I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apos-**

**ties before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus.**

We might expect that Paul would have gone up to Jerusalem and checked in with the leadership of the young church, but he did not. This was confirmation that, following his conversion, no one influenced his message. He did not go to Jerusalem to spend time with the disciples, but rather traveled to Arabia, a place of quiet and solitude, for a period of three years. This was a time for him to meditate on the Old Testament, a time to solidify his message. Perhaps this was an opportunity for him to compensate for the three years during which the disciples were instructed by Jesus.

The fourth stage of Paul's spiritual journey was his first visit to Jerusalem. Verses 18-20:

**Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother. (Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying.)**

When Paul finally went up to Jerusalem he met for 15 days with the apostle Peter. (He met with no one else except James.) These two, Peter and Paul, worked on building their relationship. They had no other agenda. Two very different individuals exchanged their conversion stories. Can you imagine the conversations they must have had! Eugene Peterson describes their encounter: "Paul didn't go to Peter to lecture him or to report to him or to propagandize him. He went to visit... In the Jerusalem visit, Peter and Paul become partners instead of rivals. Paul had become a Christian in a very different way from Peter. Peter had been a profane, rough, ungodly person; Paul had been a sophisticated, urbane, pious person. Peter had been converted from a life of sin; Paul, from a life of religion. Peter had been converted in a process of long and intense personal association with Jesus with whom he ate, talked and worked; Paul never saw Jesus personally, but had a brief vision of him along the Damascus road. Peter had the immediate confirmation of the authenticity of his experience by being installed as the leader of the Christian community; Paul had to live for years with a reputation of being a sadistic killer of Christians" (*Traveling Light*, 53-54).

Again, Paul is claiming that he did not receive his message from the disciples. The gospel was not handed down through flesh and blood.

Finally, the apostle describes the fifth stage of his spiritual journey, his work in Syria and Cilicia. Verses 21-24:

**Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ; but only, they kept hearing, "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy." And they were glorifying God because of me.**

At last, Paul began to have an effective ministry, not in Jerusalem, where he might have liked, but in Syria and Cilicia. The Gentiles living in these areas did not know him but, hearing what God had done in his remarkable conversion, began to embrace him and believe the gospel. Thus began the apostle's remarkable ministry as these converted

Gentiles glorified God.

Paul shares his personal history to convince the Galatians that his message of good news is God's message. Thus he has established the independence of his gospel, and his independence from the church leaders in Jerusalem. The point he is making is that his gospel had not been tampered with in any way. He was totally independent from the church hierarchy. His authorization was not ecclesiastical. His views were from Christ, not from the church. In this, as he says in verse 20, "I am not lying."

I will now draw spiritual application for our lives from Paul's autobiographical notes. I will suggest three principles.

First, Christians believe in a gospel that is God-revealed, not invented, produced or tainted by man. The message of the gospel is original. Paul goes to great lengths to establish this fact. The Galatians were being confused and misled by Jewish agitators, and Paul wants to make the gospel truth of freedom very clear to them.

It is comforting and assuring to know that the gospel we have received comes from God. It is source information. Someone didn't just dream it up. No one took a poll to discover what would and would not work in the church. When you think about it, as believers we are like the Galatian church. Most of us are Gentiles; we live in an ethnic melting pot. And we have staked our lives on the good news. But there are agitators and troublemakers who would like to invoke doubt about what we believe.

When my wife and I became Christians in our twenties, our parents thought we were becoming fanatical. Liz would often say to me, "What if the gospel isn't true? What if we have been fooled?" But we kept coming back to the truth that the gospel that we believed was source information. There is much confusion today with the media reporting surrounding the O.J. Simpson case. There are so many rumors that the public is unsure of the facts. What we desire is source information, straight facts. That is what the gospel is — source information.

Children sometimes play a game called the "Whisper Game." The children sit around in a circle, and one child whispers something in the next child's ear. The second child in turn whispers what he has heard into the next child's ear, and the message is relayed all the way around the circle. When the information finally is returned to the ear of the first child, invariably it has undergone an utter transformation; it bears no resemblance to what was originally said. Paul claims that nothing like this occurred with the gospel. His message came from God. It did not derive through human agency or intervention. And this is the message we, too, have come to believe. Knowing this produces clarity, assurance, and confidence when liberal theologians attack the writings of Paul, when agitators attempt to lead us into so-called "new, enlightened truth," or when troublemakers try to place us under the law. The gospel that we believe comes from God. If someone tells you something different from what God's Word says, then it is not God's message.

Here is my second principle: We today can identify with the stages of Paul's spiritual journey. If we respond to the message of freedom, then we can also learn from Paul's spiritual journey. Many of us have been through at least part if not all of Paul's spiritual odyssey. We can take great

confidence in the fact that God is leading us in some of the same ways that he led the apostle.

For instance, many of us can relate to fanatical pre-conversion attempts at self-destruction. While we were not religious zealots seeking to persecute and destroy the church, many of us were floundering in a false religion and confused about true spirituality, godliness and a genuine relationship with God. We were destroying our own bodies by wild and fanatical living. Whether we were living by some religious truth or world philosophy, we were living out a lie, separated from God. Most of us have things about our past that we are ashamed of, but none was more zealous, more lost, more blind than the apostle Paul. He calls himself the chief of sinners and the least of the saints, yet look what God in his life.

In our conversion, we find our ultimate value in God's saving actions towards us. God appointed us. He consented to reveal his Son to us and called us to himself. He knew us before we were born. He set us apart from our mother's womb and determined for us to respond by faith to his grace. God took extraordinary care and planning for us to be known by him. Surely this must mean that we are the apple of our Father's eye. Peterson writes: "We are not a last-minute intrusion on God's attention. We are not something incidental to God's plan. We are not something that just happened along in the course of certain biological goings-on in the human race. We are, each of us, 'set apart.' We are *preloved* by God" (*Traveling Light*, 48-49).

How does that make you feel? As we fully understand our conversion and what it took to accomplish it, God's actions towards us can give us wonderful assurance when we face rejection and criticism, when we blow it, or when we feel all alone.

And, like Paul, we can learn the value of an Arabian wilderness experience. At first, the apostle did not look forward to this three-year period. He went up to Damascus to begin his work, but God had a different plan for him. Whether we like it or not, our spiritual journey includes, or should include, an Arabian experience, a place where we can grow intimate with God and where his revelation becomes special and unique for us. We do not have to go to a certain location, but we do need a place of quiet and meditation. This was what happened with the patriarchs and prophets. Moses spent time in the wilderness. Elijah's first assignment was to minister to a widow in the wilderness. Joseph had to go down to Egypt. David's time in the wilderness gave birth to the great psalms. Jesus spent forty days and nights in the wilderness.

We should not fear these Arabian experiences. We should look forward to them and see them as valuable times. Thomas Merton has written: "The world of men has forgotten the joys of silence, the peace of solitude which is necessary, to some extent, for the fullness of human living ... If man is constantly exiled from his own home, locked out of his own spiritual solitude, he ceases to be a true person. He no longer lives as a man. He is not even a healthy animal. He becomes a kind of automation, living without joy because he has lost all spontaneity. He is no longer moved from within, but only from outside himself. He no longer makes decisions for himself, he lets them be made for him. He no longer acts upon the outside world, but lets it act upon him. He is propelled through life by a series of collisions with outside forces. His is no longer the life of a

human being, but the existence of a sentient billiard ball, a being without purpose and without any deeply valid response to reality” (quoted by Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 52).

I know the value of Arabian experiences in my own life. Two years ago when I began to study this book, God took me away from everything that was usual in my life and isolated me for about three months. On my sabbatical in Regent College I heard Eugene Peterson share about his life. He said that when he was about 40 years old he realized that he knew a lot about prayer, evangelism, teaching the Bible, etc., but he recognized that if he was to continue, he would have to go deeper. Shortly afterwards, he said, the Lord brought him into a safe harbor. I was struck by what he said because that was just what I was experiencing myself. Afterwards I told Mr. Peterson that that was the very thing I was going through and how much I longed for that safe harbor he had described. He said to me, “No one can give it to you. You have to find yourself a monastery.”

And we can identify with Paul in Cilicia and Syria. Working in our own Cilicia and Syria becomes part of our journey. It is a vital element in our spiritual lives if we are to live freely, not under law. Paul was bent on beginning his ministry in Jerusalem, but God sent him to a place where people did not know him. The result of God’s life in us is the sharing of our faith with others. This should be a natural outgrowth of our journey, perhaps not today, but at some point in time.

These circumstances were vital elements in moving Paul from being under law, from being an enslaved, religious fanatic to an apostle of Christ, to a life characterized by freedom and purpose. These are part of our journey of freedom as well.

Here is my final principle: God wants us to be originals, not copies, counterfeits or clones. Our text tells us that God’s message is original and that God’s messenger, Paul, was an original. There is a close connection between freedom and originality, and Paul was an original because he was free. God has called us and set us apart to be unique. The reason we see so many copies is because people are living under the law. Image is considered paramount in our world so we try to copy other people’s uniqueness. We wear clothing that has someone else’s name on it, someone like Michael Jordan or Joe Montana. Political leaders take polls to find out how they should stand on an issue. We derive our theology and morality from the media instead of looking at the source information. Our spirituality is defined by what church leaders tell us to do.

The book of Galatians is all about freedom. But we will never be truly free if we don’t have the courage to be original. We will never be free if we are trying to imitate someone else. We will never be free if we feed off of someone

else’s faith. If we are driven to look like someone else, then we will live under the law and be susceptible to doing and saying the things that people tell us, with the result that others will control us, either directly or indirectly. I am not saying that we should not value the counsel of godly men and women in the body. What I am saying is that originals are free from the control of others.

At some point in our lives we have to listen to God directly and speak to him directly. We must place a higher value on our relationship with God and become less dependent on others. This is what Paul models for us. He was an original, and we are originals too.

I will close by reading some lines that will encourage us to be the originals God created us to be:

I’m Special. In all the world there’s nobody else like me. Since the beginning of time, there has never been another person like me. Nobody has my smile. Nobody has my eyes, my nose, my hair, my hands, my voice.

I’m special.

No one can be found who has my handwriting. Nobody anywhere has my tastes — for food or music or art. No one else sees things as I do. In all of time there’s never been anyone else who laughs like me, anyone who cries like me. And what makes me laugh and cry will never provoke identical laughter and tears from anybody. No one else reacts to any situation just as I would react.

I’m special.

I’m the only one in all of creation who has my set of abilities. Oh, there will always be somebody who is better at some of the things I’m good at, but no one in the universe can reach the quality of my combination of talents, ideas, abilities and feelings. Like a room full of musical instruments, some may excel alone, but none can match the symphony of sound when all are played together. I’m a symphony.

Through all of eternity no one will ever look, talk, walk, think or do like me.

I’m special. I’m rare.

And, in all rarity there is great value.

Because of my great rare value, I need not attempt to imitate others. I will accept — yes, celebrate — my differences. I’m special. And I’m beginning to realize it’s no accident that I’m special. I’m beginning to see that God made me special for a very special purpose. He must have a job for me that no one else can do as well as I. Out of all the billions of applicants, only one is qualified, only one has the right combination of what it takes.

That one is me. Because...I’m special.

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