



# THE APPEAL FOR FREEDOM: A PASTOR'S HEART

*SERIES: GALATIANS: JOURNEY FROM LAW TO FREEDOM*

Galatians 4:8–20

6th Message

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Several years ago, my wife and I travelled to Indonesia for a pastor's conference. One of our missionaries, Eli Fangidae, had assembled one hundred pastors, and I taught the book of Galatians. As we worked our way through the text, I was so thrilled to watch these pastors, many of whom were enslaved to law in their current churches, come alive with the ideas of freedom and grace and Spirit. But right after I left, the denomination swooped in to regain control, telling these pastors that what I had taught them, what Paul wrote, was totally wrong. My heart sank when I heard the news. And so, I understand a bit of how the apostle Paul felt when he heard about the Galatians and the influence of Jewish agitators teaching Torah observance.

The Jews had a hard time abandoning the Old Testament (OT) law. They used the law and Jewish tradition as a means of identifying themselves as the people of God and defining how they were to live. One can imagine their struggle and unwillingness to let go of the old. And so, Paul had his work cut out for him.

In much of the first part of his letter, Paul has been systematically laying out his historical and theological arguments. He argues that now that Christ has come, the season of law is over. Christ has fulfilled the law and broken the curse of the law. The people of God are now free from living under law. Moreover, the people of God are now Jew and Gentile combined into one family as spiritual seeds of Abraham and sons and daughters of the Father. The Holy Spirit writes the law on the heart of the believer and addresses God as "Abba."

But now, finally, we see Paul the pastor as he expresses his concerns and desires for Galatian believers.

## The Concern

**Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. 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 am afraid I may have labored over you in vain. (Gal 4:8–11 ESV)**

Basically, Paul is concerned that the Galatians will return to slavery. Prior to being known by God they were slaves to the elemental principles of the cosmos, the *stoixeia*, basic elements of earth, air, fire, and water which were likely part of pagan idolatry. But if these believers start living under the OT law they will be enslaved all over again.

Last week we talked about the fact that Paul uses law and elemental principles interchangeably. There is no difference between living under either master. Both are weak and have no strength to redeem. Both are worthless, or poor, and have no wealth to bless. In other words, legalism is no different than pagan beliefs and practices.

Both result in slavery. The context here is observing the special days and seasons of the Jewish calendar.

Paul is also concerned that his toil has been in vain, for no purpose. Imagine the feeling of working night and day for a start-up company in Silicon Valley, and then having the company on the verge of going belly up. Some of you have probably been in that situation. This is how Paul felt. He is concerned that all his efforts have gone up in a puff of smoke, as Eugene Peterson puts it in his translation, *The Message*.

Let me suggest that we should share Paul's concern for ourselves and for others. Why? We are always in danger of losing our freedom in Christ, losing our sense of being the beloved of God. It is so easy to fall back into living under law. It is so easy to live by performance, pleasing other people to gain approval and worth, trying to find a place to belong in a church community. It is so easy to think God will love and approve of us more if we do all the right things. We stop living in God's presence and start living by the letter of the law. This appears in our church setting, or our family relationships, or in how we conduct our lives. Sometimes it is hard for us even to recognize the things in our lives that exert control over us. We can end up laboring in vain in our own life and the lives of others.

We are encouraged to examine ourselves honestly and be willing to stand firm in our freedom in Christ. A great question to ask yourself is, what is giving life and what is draining life? Often the areas that are draining us are areas where we are living under law, where we are not free. And it is not the situation, necessarily, but rather the internal dynamics of how we are living and relating.

## The Relationship

Paul had an interesting beginning with the Galatians, and he reviews his relationship.

**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. 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. (Gal 4:12–15)**

Paul's initial visit to Galatia may not have been his plan but it was God's plan. When Paul came he was ill, suffering from a physical ailment. Paul might have contracted malaria, and this ailment might have affected his eyes, since the Galatians would have plucked out their own eyes and given them to him. This may well have been Paul's thorn in the flesh he talks about in 2 Corinthians 12.

The Galatians cared for Paul willingly, even though it was a burden and they might have been tempted to disregard or resent him. They did not reject him, but received him openly, as an angel,

as Jesus himself. Paul shared the good news with them, and they embraced the gospel. Paul's physical illness led to spiritual life. They had a fond and warm relationship. It was a blessing all around. Later, he calls them his little children. But now things have changed, and he asks them, "what has become of the blessing we had."

When Paul came to Galatia, he did not come in power and strength, but rather in weakness. He was falling apart, could not go where he wanted to go. He was an inconvenience, and the Galatians had to nurse him back to health.

As was the case with Paul, some of our sweetest times of ministry or experiencing God come when we are weakest, when we are dependent on others to help us, when we are sick or ailing, when we are completely worn out, laid low, and at wits end. These are the times when God can do his best work. God's strength is perfected in weakness. Other times, our greatest blessings happen when others require our care and support, when we find God giving us the ability to love supernaturally. These times can appear to be an inconvenience at first, but then we sense God doing something we didn't expect. This is so contrary to how our world operates and, often, how we think. We seek power and success in ministry and life, but God often works greatest when things fall apart.

This is what has been so amazing about our Yucatan trips over the years. Every year someone would get sick, myself included. But often that would end up being a blessing to the whole team, as people cared for one another. It wasn't necessarily fun, but people experienced God through others.

Freedom does not come by getting control of things or people but by freely assenting to the reality of being, whether that being is a stranger's illness, or a crushing disappointment, or an incomprehensible failure, or a futile desolation. We discover the meaning of the free life in acts of compassion and loving service, not in running after people who make big promises to us. We realize the life of freedom in Christ by accepting pain and trouble and ailments, not in grabbing after the smooth solutions to life proposed by celebrities or experts.<sup>1</sup>

This is such an important principle. Real life, real weakness, real presence of God.

## The Tension

The warm relationship Paul had with the Galatians has changed. Blessing has turned to tension.

**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... (Gal 4:16–18)**

Paul is now at odds with the Jewish agitators and their desires for the Galatians. He wonders if he is an enemy and whether the agitators have taken his place. Paul speaks plainly about the agitators and exposes the truth about their false actions and desires. The agitators make much of the Galatians, literally they eagerly seek them. They flatter and fuss over the Galatians, appearing to be caring and compassionate, but their motives are not right, not good.

The real motive of the agitators is to shut the Galatians out of freedom, rather than increase their freedom. They want the Galatians to be concerned about them, to eagerly seek them so that they will be under their control. They want the Galatians to be dependent on

them and under their thumb. Sadly, this is what we see in so many churches around the world. Certainly, that is what I experienced with the pastors in Indonesia.

One of the main problems of legalism is control. We have talked about this before, but here it is again. Living under the law is living under the control dynamics of a group or a person. It is a relationship of dependency. Leaders or people who put others under law are possessive and manipulative, like the agitators were, for selfish reasons. These can be church leaders or family members. Living under law involves the spiritual, emotional, or physical control of another person that results in loss of freedom, joy, and blessing.

I don't know about you, but I am well aware of the control dynamics in my own life. One example of this is making lists. I love to make lists of what I want to accomplish in a day or a week. There is nothing wrong with making lists. But lists can become law, at least that is true for me. My total focus is on completing the list. All my energies go into completing the list. I feel great when I succeed, but I feel unsatisfied if I don't get everything done. The list controls me. When I live under the law of the list, I am not free to respond spontaneously to the work of the Spirit, to the opportunities that God might bring into my life. This is the dynamic that can happen in a church, in a family, and in relationships. We are not free to do anything we want to do, but we are free to the work of God, to his presence, and to the Spirit.

Freedom comes from trusting, not from manipulating, from leaving matters to God rather than trying to be in control.<sup>2</sup>

## The Desire

Paul's desire for the Galatians could not be more different than the agitators.

**My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you. (Gal 4:19–20)**

Paul may have called the Galatians foolish in chapter three, but here we see his fond parental affection. They are his little children. Paul's desire, as opposed to the agitators, is not for them to keep the law, but for Christ to be formed in them. He wants them to be born of God, transformed in the very likeness of Jesus. And he agonizes over them in the same way as a mother labors to give birth. In fact, it is like a miscarriage has happened, and Paul wants to give birth to new life and freedom once again.

John Stott writes that Paul, "is not satisfied that Christ dwells in them; he longs to see Christ formed in them, to see them transformed into the image of Christ."<sup>3</sup>

The goal of Christian ministry is for people to be formed in Christ. The goal is not perfect plastic Christians who live by all the rules, cardboard cutouts of Jesus. The goal is for Christ to be born in us, so that we will truly love and desire God with all of our hearts. We will truly be loving and compassionate people, even when it is inconvenient. Loving God and loving others fulfills the law. This is the work of the Spirit. Law stifles life and stunts growth in Christ. Freedom is required for authentic transformation.

John Calvin wrote (as cited in Stott 1968): "If ministers wish to do any good, let them labour to form Christ, not to form themselves, in their hearers."<sup>4</sup>

When you think about it, freedom always allows people to blossom and be enthusiastic about life. Certainly, this is true about marriage. When one of the partners is controlling, possessive, or manipulative, trying to get acceptance or love from the other, the relationship becomes strained. But when there is freedom and desire for the best for each other, these two people are drawn to one another and want to be together.

Certainly, this is true for parents and children. Young children need rules and boundaries, but as they grow parents need to give more and more freedom—freedom to make choices, freedom to risk, freedom to make mistakes. Children blossom in this type of environment, and are much more likely to become healthy adults. Think about how much more creative people are in a free and encouraging atmosphere at work. If the boss is hovering over you all the time, constantly telling you what to do and how to do it, you dry up. But if you feel the encouragement and support of a boss, you work harder, you work longer, and you do a better job.

Paul's desire is for the Galatians to be formed in Christ, for them to become as he is. He wants to be with them to restore the relationship and encourage them. Perhaps that is the best desire we can have for all the people in our lives. We want to love them like Jesus, to know Jesus, and to grow in Jesus. Our goal is not to tell them what to do and how to do it. We are encouragers for what God can do through the Holy Spirit.

## Prayer

We have been studying the book of Galatians for the past six weeks, talking about law and freedom. But our desire for this summer is not just to talk about freedom, but rather for us to grow and increase our freedom in Christ, to be transformed into Christ. And so, this morning we have left time to simply examine our lives, and to pray for freedom for ourselves, for others, and for our congregation, including our leaders. I am going to direct our prayer time, by praying for some specific categories. And while we do that there will be some instrumental music playing. Brian will close our time with prayer. This is your time to be with the Lord.

First, take some time now to reflect on where you might be living under law, in slavery to external duty, to legalistic control dynamics. Reflect on areas where you don't feel free. Awaken your desire to know God and to be known by him. Awaken your desire to be transformed into Jesus.

Lord, we lift up those who suffer from being in a legalistic church environment, those who have labored with how people in church have viewed them, those who think they are never a good enough Christian, those who have been unable to encounter your love within a church and experience being the beloved. We lift up PBC to be an encouraging place for people to blossom, be formed in Christ. Lord we pray for freedom from the law.

Lord, we lift up those who have grown up in harsh families, those who have had manipulative or possessive relationships. We lift up those who have been a controlling, law producing person, and ask that you would fill them with your love and grace so they can give freedom and grace to others. Lord we pray for freedom from the law.

Lord, we lift up those who are hard on themselves, those who are bound by duty or always seeking to please people. We pray for the freedom to give themselves grace and rest. We pray that they can let go of the burden of never being able to live up to their expectations, constantly trying harder and harder. Lord we pray for freedom from law.

1. Eugene Peterson, *Travelling Light*, (Colorado Springs Helmers & Howard 1988), 130)
2. Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 130
3. John Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, (Leicester, England Inter-Varsity Press 1968), 116
4. John Stott, 118

