Galatians Lesson 4 (2024)

**BREAKING CHAINS; RESTORING FREEDOM IN CHRIST**

Galatians 4:8-5:1

Key Verse: 5:1

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”

Have you ever seen a tiger in the wild? (Pic#1) I haven’t personally faced that situation. But I’ve seen tigers in a zoo, locked up in cages. (Pic#2) Even though they’re the same tigers, their lives are quite different. What’s the deal with a caged tiger versus one in the wild?

The zoo tigers get regular health care and a controlled diet, yet their cage doesn’t give them much space to move around. This lack of space can mess with their health, causing problems like obesity and weak muscles. On the flip side, however, wild tigers have tons of space and freedom to roam, hunt, and stay active. Living in a cage might have some perks for zoon tigers, but it also brings physical and behavioral issues that can affect their well-being.

Now, imagine you’re a tiger. Would you rather be stuck in a zoo or enjoying the freedom of the forest? Some of you might even stay in a cage for certain reasons (Pic#3). But do you think the well-fed and famous tiger in the zoo is happy? I don’t think so. I believe the tiger in the cage is angry and depressed.

In the earlier passages, 1:1-4:7, Apostle Paul strongly defended the idea that believers are free through their faith in Christ Jesus. He faced a tough battle against Jewish legalists. In the preceding passage, 3:15-4:7, Paul emphasized the differences between the Law and the Promise and slaves as well as between slaves and sons (3:15-4:7). He concluded the section by saying in 4:6-7 because believers are God’s children, they have the Spirit of his Son, making them no longer enslaved people but God’s children and heirs.

In our reading today in 4:8-5:1, Paul repeats his central point about why Christians should go back to slavery. He encourages the Christians in Galatia to stand firm in their freedom and not let themselves be burdened again by legalistic rules.

Look at verses 8-11. “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God – or rather are known by God – how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow, I have wasted my efforts on you.” Indeed, Paul was upset because the believers in Galatian churches, who experienced the freedom of following Christ, were going back to old habits of legalism. It’s like they, after graduating from college, decided to go back to kindergarten. They not only wanted to be circumcised but also followed strict religious rules and rituals, such as observing special days, months, seasons, and years (10).

However, Paul wasn’t saying it’s wrong for Christians to set aside a day to remember Christ’s birth and resurrection, like Christmas and Easter. The issue arises when such observances are done like slavery, hoping to earn spiritual merit. Instead, Paul emphasizes that if we observe these days in the freedom of Christ, letting the Spirit enrich us with grace, then it becomes a spiritual blessing. Paul’s main point is to remember the joy and freedom in Christ, avoiding the trap of rigid religious rules, no matter how they appear to be spiritual.

In verses 12-20, Paul expressed his concern and frustration with the Galatians believers. Earlier in the chapter, Paul was upset because they were returning to legalistic practices, but now he takes a different approach by discussing his personal relationship with them. Look at verses 12-20. “I plead with you, brothers and sisters, become like me, for I became like you. You did me no wrong. As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you, and even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. Where, then, is your blessing of me now? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may have zeal for them. It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always, not just when I am with you. My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!”

In these verses, Paul begins by recalling their strong relationship when they first learned about Jesus. They were like a family in Christ. However, things got confusing, and Paul felt uncertain about what was happening in their minds. He questioned whether all the teaching he had done for them was now pointless.

So, what caused this confusion? Some people, called Judaizers, influenced the Galatians and tried to discredit Paul, especially regarding his teachings about being free in Christ Jesus (17). I am sure that Paul could have felt betrayed by the Galatian Christian who doubted his integrity and turned against him. Yet, he didn’t succumb to negative emotions. Amid painful rejection, Paul demonstrated resilience, rising above negativity. This underscores Paul’s commitment to maintaining a positive and constructive approach in addressing his challenges with the Galatian community.

To Paul, Galatians weren’t just friends; he cared for them deeply as if they were his own children (12). In verses 19-20, he expressed his profound emotions, stating, *“My dear children, I feel like I’m going through the pain of childbirth again until you truly understand Christ. I wish I could be with you to change how I talk because I’m confused about what’s happening!”* These words from Paul are affectionate, illustrating the depth of his genuine concern for the Galatian Christians. Unlike the Judaizers who sought to exploit them, Paul focused on helping the Galatians understand Christ better and bring glory to Him.

The lesson here is clear: **"*A healthy relationship is built on genuine love and care, never mutual benefit.”***Paul’s attitude toward the Galatian Christians reveals authentic love goes beyond the pursuit of mutual gain. Paul’s genuine concern and willingness to endure metaphorical childbirth pains demonstrate the selfless and sacrificial nature of love in nurturing a healthy relationship. In the context of relationships, Paul’s example encourages us to prioritize the well-being of others and invest in genuine care, even if it involves personal sacrifice. I am so grateful to witness genuine love and care that makes our community strong and healthy amid daily challenges.

Throughout the epistles, Paul passionately supported the idea that believers should embrace freedom in Christ for genuine spiritual growth. On the other hand, the Judaizers had a different message for the Galatians. They didn’t reject faith in Jesus but insisted that faith alone wasn’t enough. According to them, the Galatians needed to follow the law to be better Christians. This perspective seemed convincing to many.

In today’s context, modern-day legalism can be observed in various forms, including within ministries or churches. It happens when some people think they’re better Christians because their ministry is more successful. They believe their success means God likes them more. This way of thinking creates a hierarchy in the church, where those who seem more successful think they’re more important. This kind of modern-day legalism can cause issues in the Christian community. Legalism is like yeast in the Christian community, spreading and affecting how people relate to each other and causing divisions.

In verses 21-31, Apostle Paul tells us not to mix Christian faith with Legalism. To understand Paul’s point, let’s briefly look at Abraham’s experience as recorded in Genesis 12 through 21. Look at verses 21-23. “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.” God promised Abraham many blessings, including numerous descendants, when he was 75. (Ge. 12:1-3) However, as times passed and Abraham and Sarah remained childless, Sarah suggested that Abraham have a child with Hagar, a slave woman. This decision was a mistake, not in line with God’s will, but surprisingly, God did not cancel his promise. Fourteen years later, when Abraham was 99, God fulfilled his promise, and Isaac was born to Sarah, whose body was considered biologically unable to conceive. Paul uses this story to highlight the difference between relying on human effort (symbolized by Hagar) and trusting in God’s promise (represented by Sarah) in matters of faith.

What Paul wanted to convey to the Galatians is found in verses 24-31. In these verses, precisely 24-29, Paul clarifies the significance behind the historical events he mentioned. Let’s take a look at verses 24-26. “These things 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.”

Drawing from historical events, Paul unfolds the profound truth of the gospel. He highlights a significant distinction between Sarah and Hagar, which can be best understood when classified as depicted in Chart #1. (Chart#1)

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| **The Old Covenant** | **The New Covenant** |
| **Law** | **Grace/Promise** |
| **Hagar the Slave Woman** | **Sarah the Free Woman** |
| **Ishmael, conceived by the flesh** | **Isaac, conceived miraculously.** |
| **Earthly Jerusalem in bondage** | **Heavenly Jerusalem, which is free** |
| **The people of Israel** | **Christians** |

According to Paul’s comparison, Hagar and Sarah, mothers to Abraham’s two sons, symbolize the old and new covenant in the Scripture. The old covenant relies on laws like, “***You shall not do this, and you shall not do that,”*** placing responsibility on people. However, the new covenant is based on God’s promise. However, the new covenant is based on God’s promise. While the law can’t change our sinful nature or save us, God, through his promise, takes on the responsibility himself, saying, ***“I will. I will.”*** The promise is everlasting, but the law is only transitory. In simpler terms, Paul suggests that Sarah represents the faith-based line, trusting God’s promise, while Hagar represents the works-based line.

In Paul’s analogy, two Jerusalems are mentioned: the present city of Jerusalem, representing the Old Covenant with Israel, and Jerusalem, above, representing the new covenant with Christians. If we are born of Hagar, the slave woman, we lack freedom and remain enslaved despite our efforts. Yet, if we are born of Sarah, the free woman, we have freedom as God’s children. Both Jews and Christians are Abraham’s descendants, but the crucial question is not, ***“Who is your father?” but “Who is your mother?”*** It’s about whether we are children of a free woman or a slave woman.

Verse 27 quotes Isaiah 54:1, which says, “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.” This quote from Isaiah is a metaphor for what’s happening in Galatia. In Galatians chapter 4, Paul uses the story of Sarah and Hagar to show the difference between depending on our efforts (like Hagar) and trusting in God’s promise (like Sarah). He emphasizes that spiritual life and growth happen through faith and trust in God’s promise rather than relying on our efforts and religious achievements.

Look at verses 28-31. “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.” In these verses, Paul’s message is clear: our faith should be centered on God’s promise and grace, not our efforts to follow the rules strictly. God told Abraham to get rid of Hagar and her son Ishmael. From a human point of view, it may seem cruel that God commanded Abraham to send away his son, Ishmael, whom he loved very much. But it was the only solution to the problem.

The lesson from this illustration is that law and grace, the flesh and the Spirit, cannot coexist harmoniously. “Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.” (Jn. 3:6). Paul uses this example to strongly caution against embracing a legalistic mindset. Such an approach has the potential to sow disharmony within the Christian community and hinder true freedom in Christ. Legalism and faith in Christ cannot be mixed.

In summary, Paul’s concluding message in Galatians 5:1 is powerful. Let’s read it. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burned again by a yoke of slavery.” This verse reinforces that Christ set us free for a reason. It is to grant us true freedom. We are born free in Christ Jesus. As individuals born free in Christ Jesus, Paul urges the Galatian Christians (and us) to stand unwavering in this liberty, avoiding the burdensome yoke of slavery, which signifies the legalistic practices that can hinder spiritual growth and restrict our freedom.

I love the lyrics of a song called ***“Born Free.”*** It follows, *“Born free, as free as the wind blows. As free as the grass grows. Born free to follow your heart. Live free, and beauty surrounds you. The world still astounds you. Each time you look at a star. Stay free where no walls divide you. You’re free as a roaring tide, so there’s no need to hind. Born free, and life is worth living. But only worth living 'cause you’re born free.”*

If we relate today’s passage to the story of a tiger in a cage and a tiger in a forest, it’s like saying the tiger in the cage represents someone trying to follow strict rules to earn favor with God. On the other hand, the tiger in the forest symbolizes someone who embraces the freedom in Christ, like living in an open and spacious environment. Apostle Paul was telling us that we, as God’s children, should break free and enjoy the vastness of freedom in God’s grace.

However, breaking free from legalism is no easy task. If it were, Paul would not emphasize it at all. He knew it was a challenging journey and a personal adventure of faith that we must undertake, exploring the vast ocean of God’s grace. Faith in Christ transcends merely following sound doctrines and church rules; it requires breaking away from legalism and immersing ourselves in the incredible love freely given to us through the Spirit. Only those willing to embark on this adventure will continually experience the blessing of freedom as God’s children. Otherwise, we may find ourselves confined in the cage until our journey ends. “*Are you ready for the adventure?”*