

Freedom through Grace

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[0 : 00] Okay, morning everyone. Hope you're well. Pleased to have that passage in Galatians open in front of you.! Do you want to be real for a minute? Here's two things. It's boiling hot in here. You might fall asleep, but I don't want you to fall asleep.

Here's being real about the second thing. It's this passage. So in here, there's names that you might not know. There are terms that you might not understand.

And there's an argument that, if we're honest, is really difficult to follow. And it's kept me up all night this week, trying to think about what the whole point of this is. That's the reality of this passage.

Some people call this the hardest passage to understand in the book of Galatians. Some would even say it's the hardest passage to understand in the New Testament. But we're going to give it a shot over the next 25 minutes. But here's why I want you to hold on.

Come with me to verse 1 of chapter 5 and see what the point of all this is. The climax of the case that the Apostle Paul has been building over the past few chapters. And see why, friends, this well could be the Bible study that changes your life.

[1 : 06] You with me? Here's what Paul writes. Here's the point of all of this. Which means that if you were to ask the Apostle Paul to summarize what it is to be a Christian in one word, there's many ways he would answer that question.

But here's a Galatian way he would answer that question. Summarize being a Christian in one word, freedom. Now where's he got that from?

Wham, Robbie Williams, William Wallace, they all spoke about it. Nelson Mandela, George Orwell, they both wrote about it. But here's the thing that's exclusive and unique about Jesus.

Only Jesus says I can give you it. What's up for grabs in Galatia and what's up for takes this morning? In this passage that doesn't make sense to us at first glance is true freedom.

So that's why you need to hang on in there. Let me ask you, do you feel free this morning? Maybe you're here and you're just sussing out this whole church thing and you think, listen, I've watched the Vicar of Dibley.

[2 : 27] I watched Father Ted when that was on a decade ago. And my first thought when it comes to Christianity and all this business is not the word freedom. Right? Hang on in there, dear friend. Love that you're here and see what this passage has to say to you.

How has Paul got there? But maybe you're here and you are a Christian and you think, actually, that is the last word that I think of again when it comes to my Christian life and walk.

Listen, Mr. I'm a nurse, Martha, our 15-month-year-old, back to sleep last night at 4 o'clock in the morning. Freedom was not the word that came to my mind at 4 o'clock in the morning as a Christian. And this is why this needs to be like a cup of coffee, making a cup of coffee in the morning.

You do what I do. You get up and you get the cafetiere, you put the coffee in, you pour the hot water in and you let it percolate. And then after five minutes, what you do of percolating, you just get the press and you press it down in.

And that's what God's word should do to us this morning, friends. That's what meditation in the Bible means. It means to percolate. It means to think about what God is saying in his word and impress it down into our souls and let it transform the way that we think about ourselves.

[3 : 39] It's not how things are going. It's not what we think is true of ourselves because of our circumstances. It's what God says is true about us spiritually in his word. We are free people.

Remember in the context, these false teachers have rocked up in Galatia and they're peddling a very persuasive Jesus plus me and my efforts theology.

That's what gets you right with God. And Paul's been reminding them, guys, come on, you know, that's not how it works. You know, that's not what I said. And if you want to think about it, this passage, friends, like Sesame Street back in the day, if you're old enough like me to remember that, it is brought to you in association with the number two.

Do you see it all the way through? Two sons, two covenants. Just hold on to that thought. There's a little bit of a structure. It's brought to us by the number two. Do you see it? Here's why.

This passage is telling us that it doesn't matter who you are here this morning. There are only two ways that we can live our lives. That's Paul's point. There's only two ways that you can live your life. [4 : 44] One that makes you free. And one that makes you and keeps you a slave. And to help them and us see it, Paul uses a story.

And here's the story. Come with me to verse 22. A story that he's taken from the book of Genesis, that first book of the Bible. Paul says, verse 21.

Are you not aware of what the law says? He's saying that those people who are teaching you, those people that are teaching you, they don't know their Bibles well enough. Do you not know what the law says?

Verse 22. Here's the true story from the book of Genesis about two sons. Do you follow with me? Now turn to Genesis 15 and this is what you will read.

God makes a promise to Abraham that through his family line, all the nations of the earth will be blessed. Not because there's anything special about Abraham.

[5 : 46] Maybe we thought about that a few weeks ago. It's not because he's won a kind of talent contest when it comes to holiness. God's thought, like the football scout. He'll do great on my team. Get him signed up.

No, no, no. It's simply because God is a breathtakingly good God. Father, Son, and Spirit. This is who he is. He is breathtakingly good. And that promise, if you think about it, of offspring, what does it imply?

It implies a son. Yeah? There's going to be many, many, many generations. What does it imply? It implies a son. But here's the problem.

It's twofold. Number one is that Abraham's an old dude at this point. And number two, his wife Sarah is also old. But for her, she's also barren.

Now hold that thought. And yet God says, despite what you can see, despite what you can fathom, despite what you can reason, I will act so that you will have a son.

[6 : 48] This one is all on me. Trust me. Walk with me. And yet fast forward one chapter to Genesis 16. And Abraham and Sarah are suspect of this promise.

Is God good for it? Is he worth waiting on? And what they decide to do is to just take matters into their own hands.

We're going to try and do this ourselves. I think we've got a little bit of a helping hand. What they try and do is they try and wrestle control back of a situation that's out with their control. They try and wrestle it back so that they're the ones that are in control of it.

They just lose patience with God. And if that's the kind of macro story, friends, here's the micro story of what's going on in Abraham and Sarah's lives.

And this is kind of in between the text, but something really important to see. What does childlessness represent? What does barrenness represent in a Genesis culture for Abraham and Sarah?

[8 : 01] It represents shame. And they think to themselves, when it comes to our shame, when it comes to gathering and getting for ourselves joy, we're going to give God a helping hand with that.

We're not going to trust that God is the one who's completely the one who's going to deal with our shame and restore and give us joy. Hold on for that, friends, where we're going to finish in 10 minutes.

Maybe that's exactly where you're at. We're going to see how God is the only one who can deal with our shame and give us joy in a way that's nothing to do with our circumstances.

Sarah has this servant. She's called Hagar. This is the planet they hatch. She says to Abraham, how about you sleep with her? And we'll get a child that way.

Because that's what happened in this day. If your slave had a child, and if you had a child, that child becomes yours. And the way that the story reads, Abraham doesn't need much persuading.

[9 : 12] Like you work out the birds and the bees there, but he doesn't need much persuading. In actual fact, if you know the Bible story, what's going on here with Abraham and Sarah is very like Adam and Eve. Adam didn't need much persuading.

And so born to Hagar is this son called Ishmael. But God is saying that it's not going to be through his side of the family tree that the blessing of promise will come.

So if you like, Ishmael becomes, just hold this, he is the son of the slave woman in this story. He is son number one, right? But God's not forgotten his promise of giving Sarah a son.

So then in Genesis 17, God reiterates to Abraham years later that his wife Sarah will have a son. Conceived in the normal way, but miraculous in that this is not something that the two of them could bring about by themselves.

And more than that, God means business because he gives that son a name. This son will be called Isaac. Isaac's name means laughter.

[10 : 15] And I love that because it's almost like we laugh because we could never have done this on our own. We laugh because, God, you are so good and great and faithful. This son will be called laughter. And fast forward to Genesis 21 with Abraham now at the ripe old age of 100.

Sarah gives birth to Isaac. And he is the child of free woman. That's son number two. Okay, son number one, son number two. That's the story.

So Paul sets up here. Remember, there's two ways to live your life. There's two ways to try and relate to God. That's the story. Now, you've got to understand that there's the word allegory here. But what's going on here? This is not Paul giving a commentary on that Genesis story. There's a lot going on there. There's lots of mess. There's lots of grace. There's not a commentary on that story. What it is, is Paul's using it like a parable. Saying the backstory of those two boys represent two ways that you can try and live your life.

[11 : 23] And as we get into that, here's the three questions to carry with you through this bit. He's going to ask them, which son are you when it comes to relating to God?

Which backstory is yours? And which city do you belong to? And which future is yours? And that's what Paul means there, verse 24, by two covenants.

Take, remember these two sons, take Ishmael. Take son number one. What's his backstory? What does he represent? He represents trying to do things in our own strength.

Trying to give God a helping hand. Trying to deal with the shame that's ours on our own. Trying to force a future for ourselves. Because that's way of relating to God number one.

Our effort, our logic, our reason, our abilities, our energy, our wisdom. That's why in the story he is like verse 24. Real life, Mount Sinai.

[12 : 24] Now just go with this, okay? Mount Sinai, the very place where God gave the law to his people. You see the link?

Son number one, trying to do it in your own strength, trying to earn God's favor, is like Mount Sinai. And Paul's already said, you go that way, you try and earn it, you're going to end up in slavery. Spiritually speaking, slavery. You know, I've got a fellow dad that I speak to on the school run every morning. He works for the People's Postcode Lottery in Charlotte Square.

I asked him about his job. He said this. He said, the lottery's all set up. It holds out for you the win. But the whole thing is set up to make sure that you lose.

Right? That's why they've got their offices in Charlotte Square. It's why he gets free tea and coffee and biscuits every day. Because the whole thing is, you're on a loser. Right? And Paul said that about the law.

[13 : 29] Holding out life. But we try and do it in our own strength. We realize how far short we fall. And it gives us death.

It makes us slaves. That's what he said all the way through. It holds out for his life. The problem is not the law. The problem is our inability to keep the law and do what it says.

It will always find us out. It will always leave us being guilty. It will always leave us longing for God to act to make us right with him. And Paul's saying in the context, these false teachers who've rocked up and are teaching you.

And they must have sounded really persuasive with their Jewish background. With all this stuff. All this history going on. You can't seriously consider yourselves the adopted sons of God. Children of God. By doing nothing.

You've got to come and add circumcision. You've got to add all this stuff. You've got to do all this stuff. You've got to take control back of the situation. Paul says, verse 24, if you go that way, you're slaves. And the present Jerusalem in Paul's mind.

[14:38] Do you see that there at verse 25? The real present Jerusalem in Paul's day is full of people who think like that. And of course, that's a direct attack on these false teachers who have come from Jerusalem.

So son one. Backstory of son one. Mindset son one. Is that worldview of self-reliance. And in complete contrast, son two, Isaac.

What's the backstory of Isaac? Isaac was not born according to the flesh. Not by human reason. Not by human ability. Not by human wisdom. His birth was the result of God's supernatural intervention in fulfillment of his own promise.

That means that his birth was all of God. All of God. Which means if you're a Christian here today, your spiritual birth, the only reason we understand Jesus for who he is, all of God.

Do you see where Paul says, if you're a Christian today, you have been born from. Verse 26. You have been born from above.

[15:51] And the Jerusalem above that Paul's talking about there is the very dwelling place of God. And that's why she is the mother of all Christians.

Of people whose lives are not merely the product of human resources and logic and effort, but people who are the product of God's supernatural work in our hearts.

And that's why, friends, if you're wondering what on earth that quote there is doing. In verse 27.

That's why he quotes from Isaiah 54. Always worth looking in your Bibles about the little asterisks that will tell you where people are quoting from. It's not just random.

He's picked that for a reason. Right? Be glad, barren woman. And you think, okay, I get that. Like Sarah barren, this is barren woman. I kind of get that. But there's so much more going on with this quote.

[16:52] You up for it? Barren woman being glad, crying aloud with praise and joy. God reversing the fortunes. God doing the great reversal.

God giving life the restorer of joy. Not to do with circumstances, but because he is this God who delivers on his promise. How has he got there? Friends, here's the thing. Isaiah 54 is in this context, this little bracket in Isaiah.

It's all about how God is going to bring that about. Now, come on, do some maths with me. What comes before Isaiah 54? Isaiah 53.

Yeah? Isaiah 53. All about how God is going to send the suffering servant. Whose work is going to bring about this great reversal.

Who's going to bring about joy. Who's going to bring about freedom. Who's going to do it because he bears the sin of God's people on himself. Who's going to act to be a lamb that's led to the slaughter.

[18:01] To act that he's going to be one who's going to bring light and freedom to his people. Isaiah 54 is only Isaiah 54 because of Isaiah 53.

The servant who's going to bear the shame. Of the sin of God's people. He's going to bear the shame and in its place. Because of his work.

Bring and give joy and freedom. And forgiveness. That's what comes before Isaiah 54. Again, same exercise.

But what comes after Isaiah 54? Come on, someone help me out here. Isaiah 55. Now if you turn there, here's what you see.

God says in light of that. Come. Come to me. Come to me. Buy bread without price. Get water without payment.

[18:59] This is not about you earning it. This is about coming to me and basking in what I've done to give you this freedom. He is the giver of joy.

Come all you who are first thirsty. Come. Drink. Find life. You put your faith in Jesus. You are someone who's been given life in the power of the Spirit from above.

And so Paul says, back to our big thing. Which son are you? To the Galatians. To us. Which son are you? You're going to try and earn it yourself?

You're going to try and bring some self-reliance? You're going to try and deal with your shame and your guilt by yourself? Or are you going to trust completely in the promise of God and the work of

God to give you that?

Ishmael. Self-reliance. Isaac. All of God. Which city do you belong to? Present Jerusalem. In slavery. Heavenly Jerusalem.

[20 : 09] Born from above. Which future is yours? Inheritance. Or no inheritance. And here's Paul's point. Verse 28. Galatians.

Because you've been born from above. Because you are son number two. You are children of the promise. You are free.

I don't think anyone gets this better than the old hymn writer Augustus Toplady. They just don't do names like that anymore, do they?

In his famous old hymn, many of us will know it, Rock of Ages. And he's got this line and it's just like, did you perceive this? Right? Let the water and the blood from thy riven side which flowed. Right? Got a track with the old English there. But you know what he's saying? Be of sin the double cure. Save me of its guilt and its power. And you say Christ has saved us for freedom.

[21 : 16] What does freedom mean? Friends, I wonder if some of us need to wonderfully recapture the sweet smelling aroma of what Augustus Toplady talks about in his hymn. Of that double cure.

Right? Double cure. Free me from its penalty and its power. Because maybe you're here and you're like me. Your life is unspectacular.

It is mundane. It is ordinary. And you live your life for Jesus. Particularly in this world. And friends and family think you're bonkers. Peers and neighbours think that you're the one that's a slave.

With your limiting stance on sexuality and gender. Following Jesus and that stuff. With your dated views on when life begins and it ends.

With your restricting belief that there's only one way to God. What constraints put on you because you follow this old dated book. See if there's anyone living their lives in the world that's a slave.

[22 : 12] It's you. I take it there's something of that persecution language that he talks about there. Which is true because you follow Jesus and you believe this stuff.

And Paul would say in this passage. If people are making you feel like the slave because you follow Jesus. You're completely relying on him. It's not true.

Here's the thing. Jesus has freed us from something. From the penalty of sin. From the shame that is ours. From the mistakes that dominated our lives.

We'll think more about this next week. Because these guys are from a Greek background. Pagan background. All sorts of stuff would have gone on in their lives. Right? But Jesus has freed you from all that stuff.

From regrets. From mistakes. He's freed you from it. The suffering servant paid for it all on the cross. And Jesus didn't just save us from something. He saved us for something.

[23 : 10] Do you see that word? It's really important. It's for freedom. There's a purpose that Jesus saved us. Not so that you can wander aimlessly around living your life. God called out a people for himself.

Jesus saved a people. He called us out of the kingdom of darkness. As Stuart started. And he's placed us in his kingdom of marvelous light. And he said, I've saved you so that you would live for me in the power of the spirit.

And the rest of this letter is about what that looks like in our lives. I've saved you out of this self-obsessed wall of mirrors that your heart has built around itself.

That we think, friends, that we are the center of the world. And that's the thing. Serving and worshipping Jesus wasn't on any of our radars before he got involved in our lives.

We just weren't interested. We were spending our days pursuing dead idols. Things that will just get us nowhere. And Jesus has saved us. The Father loves us.

[24 : 09] The Spirit lives in us. So that we would live our lives to serve and love and worship the living and the true God. Because there's an inner desire now.

That I want to live my life for him. Because he loved me. He gave himself for me. His Spirit lives inside me. He's taken out that heart of stone. He's putting in a heart of flesh.

And he's transforming me, us, into Jesus' image. So, friends, if you're a follower of Jesus, you're free.

United to him. Your life has got a different purpose now. Had our eyes opened. Now we are living, adopted children of our Father.

And so, Paul says to these Galatians, as he brings his kind of argument to a close before he moves. At the end of this letter to get really practical, he just says, listen, which son are you? Trying to do it in your own strength, self-reliance.

[25 : 16] See where that gets you? Are you completely reliant on Jesus? Are you born from above? Are you filled with the Spirit? Do you see the future that's yours? You're free. You know, just as we close, I was trying to think of any free people that I could think of who God has used in my life.

And I was thinking this week of my friend Trevor. Trevor and his wife Val were here about 18 months ago. They lived down in Chessington in London. And he once gave me this one bit of advice about life as a Christian.

And he was thinking about Christian ministry, but his life as a Christian, about how his life has transformed over the years. And he said this. He said, you've got to live your life as someone who doesn't take yourself seriously.

Because you take the gospel really seriously. Don't take yourself too seriously. Because the gospel has freed you to take the gospel really seriously. And I thought to myself, do you know one thing I'd love more of in my life?

It's that spirit of self-forgetfulness. And Trevor just articulated it. Right? And it struck me that that's the opposite of what people in our world say.

[26 : 26] It's the opposite of the drumbeat of this culture in which we live. Which says, take yourself really seriously. But don't take truth seriously. And no wonder, friends, we're living in a burnout culture.

I have to prove myself. I have to earn my way. I have to show my worth. I have to find my purpose. I have to seek my happiness. I even have to define who I am. No wonder we live in a burnout culture. How different then the Christian is free. Rejoicing in the love that the Father has shown us.

Resting in the work that Christ has done for us. Reveling in what the Spirit inside of us is doing in us. We're free. And so Paul says, which son are you?

Jesus said, if you hold to my teaching, you really are my disciples. Then you will know the truth. And the truth will set you free.

[27 : 34] Let's pray. Let's pray. And so Lord, we give you all the praise and all the glory this morning.

That because of the work of Jesus. Because of the truths of Isaiah 53. That we can come to you today trusting in him. As those who are free.

Those who are forgiven. Those who have been cleansed. Those who are pure. Those with a future that's ahead of us. Because we are united to him. And Lord, so often we just don't feel like it.

So often our circumstances just clouding our view. But Lord, whatever's going on in our lives today. I pray that that identity. That freedom that we have in him.

Would come with a unique freshness. And a wonderful glory today. So Lord, we love you.

[28 : 35] But thank you that this letter's constantly told us. That we can say that because you loved us first. Father, be with us as we journey now onto that time of communion.

As we celebrate and remember what Jesus has done for us. Be with us. Heavenly Father. We pray these things. And Jesus is powerful. And it's his strong. And in his immovable name.

Amen. Amen. Amen.