
Bondage & Freedom

Passage: Galatians 4:21-31

Overview

“So you want to follow the law, do you...? Well...enjoy the bondage that comes from being a child of the slave woman.” The Apostle Paul continues his line of reasoning and now turns his final weapon of assault upon the heritage of those whose dependence is on a “works-based righteousness.” Not only is the legacy of bondage lacking in nobility, it delivers only the opposite of what it offers.

Comparisons

- Bondage = Hagar: Paul identifies Hagar with the lineage of natural plans and human effort – these are the same plans and efforts upon which every non-Christian lays total dependence.
- Freedom = Sarah: Paul identifies Sarah with the lineage of supernatural promise and miraculous faithfulness – this is the same promise and faithfulness upon which every Christian lays total dependence.

Consider this...

“The gospel is more threatening to religious people than non-religious people... One of the ways we know that our self-image is based on justification by Christ is that we are not hateful and hostile to people who differ from us; one of the ways we know that our self-image is based on justification by works is that we persecute!” (Keller, 128)

Application

- How do you relate to the Law of God?
- Remind yourself of your sin, so that you may also be reminded of God’s grace
- NOW YOU ARE CHILDREN OF PROMISE!

Gospel Implications

“The Gospel cries out that the people who have most will find that their false strategies of self-worth collapse – and the ‘barren, the poor, the marginal’ can be more fruitful, rich and powerful than all the rest.”

-Tim Keller

Galatians 4:21-31

Intro: If someone asked you if you preferred bondage over freedom, you would probably think it was a joke. The choice is easy in theory. Freedom is something to be cherished and bondage is something we naturally abhor. However, it is quite likely that you choose bondage over freedom every day. When it comes to human acceptance before God, bondage is our natural, default setting. Sinners constantly strive towards freedom, but they do so while wearing the unbreakable chains of bondage. Some sinners deny that the chains are real, and many sinners pretend that they have found a key to unlock them. Still the chains remain, but there is freedom to be enjoyed. The promise of God is to free sinners, and the promise is sure.

EXPOSITION of the passage:

- **Works-based religion does not deliver what it promises.**

21 Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?

- The law is not ineffective to save because of its lacking goodness, but because of sinfulness on the part of humanity (Romans 8:3).
 - Righteousness acquired by the keeping of the law requires perfect obedience to the law.

- **People are aware of some moral law, but they relate to it in various ways.**

- 4 Kinds of people regarding the law: Upon deeper consideration of the Law of God, the true posture of a person is revealed. That posture usually takes the form of one of four categories.

Note Keller's labels:¹

1. **Law-Obeying and Law-Relying** – These people are under the law, and are usually very smug, self-righteous and superior. Externally, they seem very sure of their right-standing before God, but underneath the surface they can be very insecure about their acceptability. This makes them touchy and very sensitive to criticism.
 - Strong legalists, “Good” church-going people, many cults, and religious systems (such as Islam and Mormonism) are examples of this worldview.

¹ Keller, 118

2. **Law-Disobeying and Law-Relying** – These people have a religious conscience of strong works-righteousness, but they are not living consistently with it. They tend to be more humble and tolerant than the previous group, but they are also more guilt-ridden, subject to mood swings and often afraid of religious topics.
 - Monastics, some philanthropists, and classic biker-gang stereotypes are examples of this worldview.
3. **Law-Disobeying and Not Law-Relying** – These are people who have thrown off the concept of the law of God. They largely choose their own moral standards and then insist that they are meeting them.
 - Relativists, humanists, and post-modernists are examples of this worldview.
4. **Law-Obeying and Not Law-Relying** – These are Christians who understand the Gospel and are living out of the freedom it provides. They obey the law of God out of the joyous gratitude that comes from the knowledge of their sonship, and out of freedom from the fear and selfishness that false idols had generated. They are more tolerant than #3, more sympathetic than #1, and more confident than #2.
 - Gospel-centered, Christ-clinging, sinful and humbly obedient Christians are examples of this worldview.

- Most Christians, it seems, struggle to live out #4.
 - Where do you see yourself described best?

- **Paul uses real events of history to provide a symbol of relationship.**

22 For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. 23 But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise.

- The history of this account is given in Genesis 16-18, 21.
 - Sarah (the free woman & Abraham's wife) was barren, and she had heard the promise of God – Abraham would be the father of a multitude through a child of promise. Since she could not conceive a son, she offered her female slave, Hagar, as a substitute child-bearer. Abraham and Hagar did conceive a son, but this was a son “according to flesh” (a natural fleshly descendant and a result of natural fleshly effort). God's promise was not to be accomplished through fleshly effort, however, and Abraham did later conceive a son with Sarah.

This son, Isaac, was the result of a miraculous fulfillment of God's promise. Isaac, therefore, was "a child of promise."

- The Apostle Paul uses this real historical account to provide an analogous illustration to the relationship of all humanity with God (v24 Paul says, "this may be interpreted allegorically..." That is, he is using this account as a symbolic representation of something else.).
 - The contrast is between *two kinds of relationship*.
 - The First: Those of fleshly descent and fleshly effort
 - The Second: Those of Spiritual birth and faith in God's promise
- **The law enslaves sinful humans, and this is extremely offensive - especially to first-century Jews.**

24 Now this may be interpreted allegorically:

these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. 25 Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.

- "*this may be interpreted allegorically*" - First, Paul does not invent a system of interpretation that allows one to allegorize (or look for hidden meaning) the Old Testament. Nor does he mean to say that Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, and the rest were only fictional characters used to communicate a spiritual truth (something akin to Aesop's fables).
 - He does expound upon a correlation already made in the Old Testament (Isaiah 54), as we shall see below.
- Second, *Mount Sinai, Jerusalem, and children of God* were all familiar phrases and concepts to the Jewish people. These were all very positive and cherished ideas in their culture.
 - Keller - "Jews knew that they were the children of Abraham, descended from him through Isaac, and heirs of God's promises. Their ancestors had received God's law at Mount Sinai; their nation was centered on Jerusalem and its temple... The false teachers were telling the Gentile Galatian Christians that to be true children of Abraham, inheritors of the promises, they needed to become *Jewish*."²
 - Seemingly, the best and most plausible approach of man towards God was through God's law and supported by the temple in Jerusalem...

² Keller, 120

- BUT, Paul just said that this approach was hopeless. It leads, not to God, but to slavery and destruction.
 - This was extremely offensive to the Jewish people in Paul's day, and it is extremely offensive today because Paul just said, "Even if you are from a godly family with a marvelous lineage... Even if you have followed all the forms of religious piety... Even if you are better than everyone else you meet, YOU are SINFUL and POWERLESS - YOU are a SLAVE!"

- **The City of God is the true Jerusalem. Here is freedom & ultimate fulfillment.**

26 But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. 27 For it is written,

"Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband."

- *"the Jerusalem above"* – this is a common theme throughout the Scriptures
 - Hebrews 12:18-22 – "18 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest 19 and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them... (this is a description of what the Hebrew people experienced at Mt. Sinai) 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to **the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem...**"
 - John sees the glorious hope of final glory in chapter 21 & 22 of Revelation.
 - John says that there is going to be the *"holy city [of] Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God"* (21:10-11). John says much the same thing elsewhere, but adds imagery when he says he saw *"the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband"* (21:2).
 - It is clear that believers in the promise of God (that promise He has made to save sinners and dwell with them as their God and King) are anticipating a spiritual and eternal fulfillment of this promise. We are seeking a Jerusalem from above, a heavenly home, not a pilgrimage to some terrestrial site in the Middle East. Only those who were confused or corrupt were looking for an earthly kingdom with a fleshly focus (Luke 17:20-37; John 18:33-38; Luke 24:13-21).

- *“it is written”* – Paul takes a concept that is already on display in the Old Testament, namely the concept in Isaiah 54, and he develops it further to draw out the implications.
 - The Apostle Paul quotes from Isaiah 54:1
 - Isaiah was a prophet during desolate times. Isaiah’s commission was to be a prophet of judgment. God says to Isaiah, “Go, and say to this people: ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes.’” (v9b-10a)
 - Throughout the book of Isaiah’s prophecy, hope is mentioned several times, but chapter 53 is of particular interest because of its clear description of the “suffering servant.”
 - Isaiah 53 – “1 Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? 2 For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. 3 He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. 4 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. 7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. 8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the

transgression of my people? 9 And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. 10 Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. 11 Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. 12 Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.”

- In light of chapter 53, verse 1 of chapter 54 becomes glaringly bright. Because of the promise/prophecy of chapter 53, we who are desolate may indeed cry out with overwhelming joy – even in the midst of our desolation and with no physical sign of “barrenness” relenting.
- *“Rejoice, O barren one”* – Rejoice; even now rejoice.
 - For the Lord is our Husband, and His heavenly kingdom is our home. We are heading for the Celestial City, and our current experience of sinful desolation has no power at all to keep us from enjoying the full benefits of our familial relation to the King.
- **Those who believe the promise are *children of the rejoicing barren one*.**

28 Now you..., brothers..., like Isaac..., are children of promise.

- This single phrase is so full of meaning that it deserves more time and attention than the whole of this passage has been given. The following will serve only as a brief overview of its content and implications.
 - NOW...
 - Paul says, not later, not were, but NOW (right now) you are children of promise!

- Now YOU...
 - You undeserving Gentile. You who are unworthy, wretched, and guilty. You who are not a people. You who are dishonorable, unacceptable, unrighteous, and unclean. Yes... You are now a child of promise!
- Now you, BROTHERS...
 - You are my family, though you are not naturally so. We belong together under the common bond of grace for forever. There is nothing that loosens us from our familial bond, for the bond is held by the Creator of our souls. You are my brother and my sister of promise!
- Now you, brothers, LIKE ISAAC...
 - Just as unlikely as the birth of this son, you and I were unlikely to be called holy and blameless before God. Isaac was promised by God, conceived by His power and brought forth because of His active hand. You, like Isaac, are children of promise!
- Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are CHILDREN...
 - You are children freedom and not slaves in bondage. You are family and not hired hands. You are loved and not tolerated. You are unreservedly loved and not merely kept in good standing because of personal productivity. Yours is the relationship of child to father with the best and most glorious Father of all time! You are welcome in His presence and a display of His marvelous work. You are children of promise!
- Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of PROMISE.
 - Your acceptance is based on the promise of God, not on your ability to be, do, say or think anything. God says it; that settles it. God's promise is kept by His steadfast love. There is none like Him. His love never ends, and His promises never fail. You are a child held in the safe arms of the trustworthy promise Keeper!

- **Paul draws a link between relationships – fleshly children to spiritual ones.**

*29 But just as at that time he who was **born according to the flesh** persecuted him who was **born according to the Spirit**, so also it is now.*

- Ishmael (the child of flesh) persecuted Isaac (the child of promise or of the Spirit), or Paul was possibly referring to the decedents of the one persecuting the other.³
 - Paul draws upon this historical persecution to relate it to the persecution that the Galatian Christians were now facing. The fleshly descendants of Abraham were persecuting them, even though they were rightly spiritual descendants and heir according to promise.
- While Jewish persecution throughout human history often displays those with a Jewish ethnicity as the victim rather than the perpetrator, the earliest persecution against Christians came largely from the Jewish community.
 - This prosecutorial relationship provides an example of the inevitable interaction that takes place between established adherents of a works-based-righteousness system and those who readily admit their inability. Those who are “Lay-Relying” and also believe themselves to be “Law-Abiding” will regularly fight with great zeal to keep their illusion.
 - Non-religious people have nothing to lose in the way of self-righteousness when presented with the message of the cross. On the other hand, those who still cling to their own ability, effort and obedience have much to lose when confronted with the choice between themselves and an exclusive redeemer.

- **Continuing with the allegorical application, the free son is not to associate with the slave son as a companion on the same road toward the same destination.**

*30 But what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the slave woman and her son, for **the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.**”*

- This is to say that *sons of freedom* are to recognize the severe chasm that exists between themselves and the *sons of bondage*.
 - This is not to say that *sons of freedom* are to have nothing to do with *sons of bondage*. On the contrary, Paul elsewhere speaks of being a

³ For further study on this reference to persecution, see Bruce’s note at http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ffb/abraham_bruce.pdf. Specifically, look for Bruce’s comments concerning his own question, “But how and when did Ishmael ‘persecute’ Isaac?”

debtor to all people everywhere in the sense that he must proclaim the Gospel to all people everywhere (Romans 1:14).

- With our souls at stake, we should not allow even the hint of meritorious worth in our own works, as though they might be applied towards our acceptance before the Holy God.

- **Again, there is freedom here, and only here.**

*31 So, **brothers**, we are not **children of the slave** but **of the free woman**.*

- Brothers, we are not slaves; we are free! insecure

APPLICATION of the passage:

- **Where do you see yourself in relationship to God?**
 - Are you Law-Relying? Do you look to some list of works or effort to make you worthy of God's love and acceptance?
 - Are you Law-Disobeying? Do you recognize that you have not only disobeyed God's law, but also that you have desired to do so? Do you understand that even now there is love for sin in your heart?
 - Do you think of yourself as Law-Obeying while relying upon that obedience to earn God's love and acceptance? Do you imagine yourself to be quite good in God's sight because of who you are or what you do? Are you often looking down upon others for their lack of personal piety?
 - Are you Christ-Relying and humbly Law-Obeying? Does your love and gratitude towards Christ spur you on towards obedience? Do you sense a freedom to do, say, and be what Christ commands? Are you sorrowful concerning your personal sin, and are you marked by a desire for humble obedience to Christ?
- **Do you live in bondage or freedom?**
 - Are you in bondage under the requirements that you have made?
 - Are you often defensive about what you do and how you live?
 - These may be indications that you are in bondage to a works-based-righteousness system of thinking.
 - Are you living in freedom from guilt and sin?
 - Do you find peace and pardon from guilt when you look to Christ?
 - Do you notice that your love for sin is diminishing and that you actually hate your desires for sin?
 - These may be indications that you do live in freedom, and we should always ask for God's grace to enjoy growing freedom like this.

MY PRAYERS concerning this passage:

- 1) May God help us to believe the promise of God to save us
- 2) May God make us to know the freedom that is enjoyed by all His children
- 3) May God create a kind of Gospel-centered Community here that cultivates a greater awareness and love for this kind of freedom

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