

# Galatians 5 – Freedom in Christ

## Remembering Israel

I want you to travel with me in your imagination for a moment. Imagine that you were one of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt. You have just about coped with making the required tally of bricks daily when suddenly you are told that you will no longer be provided with the straw necessary to make the bricks. Some of your number will need to go and gather straw from fields wherever they can find it but your reduced working team will still be required to make the same number of bricks daily. Every time you fall behind the quota you find yourself beaten by the cruel Egyptian taskmasters. Your life is a complete misery.

You have heard that your ancestors worshipped a God who promised to care for his people Israel and so you cry out to this God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for help. But you get no answer. It is as if he does not see or hear – or if he does, he does not care.

But then a man called Moses comes on the scene to tell you that God has heard your prayers and will come down to free you from slavery. This man Moses confronts Pharaoh and demonstrates that the God of the Israelites is far more powerful than all the gods of Egypt. After the drama of Passover night in which every firstborn son in Egypt is struck dead, Moses leads you out of Egypt. You are free at last!

But then you are nearly recaptured by Pharaoh's army. You are only saved when God opens up the waters of the Red sea and leads you through on dry ground before the waters roll back to drown Pharaoh's pursuing army. You are free at last!

But then you face the desert. Is this the Promised Land God rescued you to enjoy? But even here God comes to your rescue, providing water, bread from heaven and Quail to eat. Until at last you come to Mt Sinai to meet with this God who has set you free.

But then Moses seems to abandon you. Who will lead you now and where will you go? So you persuade Aaron, Moses' brother to make a god for you, a god you can see, a god you can handle, a god you can manipulate. So Aaron makes a golden calf for you to worship.

Having been set free from slavery, you have turned again to serve a god just like the idol gods of the people who once enslaved you. Having seen all that God did to redeem you, you have turned your back on him in favour of captivity to idols.

## The Christians in Galatia (5:1-12)

This also is the story of the Christians in Galatia – or at least, their story is dangerously similar to that of Israel. Paul writes to them at the beginning of Galatians 5, "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."

You have been set free by Christ, says Paul. You have been freed from the guilt of sin and condemnation of the law. When Jesus was crucified for you, he took upon himself the curse that God pronounced upon a world that had rebelled against him (see 3:13). He bore the punishment that your sin deserved and so set you free from its oppression and condemnation. He set you free also from the need to conform to the pattern of life that characterises the world in which you live – your previous enslavement to all that others expected of you.

At the cost of his own blood, Christ set you free and, "If the Son sets you free you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). Enjoy the freedom you have in Christ. Stand firm in that freedom and do not allow anything or anyone to drag you back into a life of bondage.

Paul is writing primarily to Gentile Christians who have come to rejoice in the salvation they have in Christ. But now some Jews who also profess to believe that Jesus is the Christ are seeking to persuade them that Christ is not enough. If they really want to live as the people of God then they must obey the Jewish law, they must be circumcised and observe the various Jewish ceremonies.

To Paul, this debate is all about how a person can be righteous before God. These Judaisers in Galatia are saying that the righteous person is the one who lives by the Mosaic law and seeks to ensure that their life is

shaped by the practices of Judaism. Paul is quite blunt when he says about those who think that their righteousness is grounded in their lawkeeping: "You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace." (5:4).

And Paul knows what he is talking about. He recounted his life-story to the Christians at Philippi who were facing similar false teaching. There had been a time when he had sought to establish his own righteousness through lawkeeping and, in his zealous persecution of the Church considered that "as for legalistic righteousness [he was] faultless" (Philippians 3:6). But then the risen Christ appeared to him and he came to see that all his law-keeping righteousness was like filthy rags. All that he treasured before he now considers like the most vile garbage, "that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith" (Philippians 3:8-9).

Paul is reminding these Christians that they have embraced Christ as Saviour and Lord. In him you have a righteousness freely given you by God. To seek now to adopt all the practices of the Jewish law would be to be "alienated from Christ, fallen away from grace." If you follow this path, "Christ will be of no value to you" (5:2). You cannot have Christ plus some other means of righteousness. It will mean turning your back on the grace of God in Christ. Do not allow these people to lead you astray for their teaching can have an insidious effect on your life, like yeast working through dough. Rather, be single-minded and "through the Spirit ... eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope" (5:5).

And Paul is equally blunt in what he has to say about these false teachers. He wishes that they would go the whole hog and castrate themselves.

## **Application**

Our confidence is in Christ and his atoning work: "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (6:14).

But are we not sometimes tempted to trust in other things in addition to the Lord Jesus Christ? To place our confidence in our baptism or in communion – these are symbols that focus our faith on Christ and not additions to faith in him. If someone were to ask us for the grounds of our confidence that we are accepted by God, what would we say?

Do we sometimes demand conformity to various rules for acceptance in the Christian community in addition to simple faith in Christ? In past generations many churches had lists of what Christians do not do – no dancing, no cinemas, no sports on Sundays etc. Are we tempted to feel that some other Christian, trusting in the work of Christ, is not really "one of us" because of something they do or don't do?

We need to be careful never to think or to suggest that the 'true' Christian needs Christ plus ...

## **The Source and Nature of Christian Freedom (5:13-15)**

The theme of Paul in these verses is the freedom that we have in Christ: "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" (5:1).

But if the Christians at Galatia – and also Christians today such as ourselves – are being told that we do not need to be subject to the Jewish law, what is to stop us exercising our freedom to live just as we please? What is to stop us, in effect, saying to ourselves, "let us continue in sin that grace may abound!"?

Well how did the Galatians gain this freedom? Remember what Paul had to say to them in 3:1-3:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?

It is the Spirit of the risen Christ who brought them into this freedom they enjoy in Christ. The Spirit worked in their hearts when they heard Paul preach of Christ crucified and he made the truth live, just as if they had been there at the foot of the cross. It was the Spirit who drew them to faith in Christ, to trust in Jesus

Christ for their salvation. It was the Spirit who filled their hearts with joy and made them aware that they were much loved children of the living God, enabling them to cry out, "Abba, Father".

This is also what Paul wrote later to the Corinthians when he is again talking about the bondage of Jews under the law, 2 Cor 3:15-18. It is the Spirit who gives freedom. He works in our hearts not merely to give new beliefs but to free us from the bondage of our past – whatever shape that may have taken. He sets us free to live the life God intended us to live when he created us *in his image*. The Spirit, filling us with the life of the risen Christ, creates us anew in the image of God.

Look at Gal 5:13, "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love." Paul says that knowing Christ is like being freed from an addiction – to drugs, sex, money, control, selfish desire. Such addictions drove us to do what we wanted, but were destructive of ourselves and others. By his Spirit, Jesus sets us free, free to live a life no longer shaped by such addictions but by *love* (5:13b-14). Love is the hallmark of such freedom for it reflects the heart of God and the source of the Gospel (Jn 3:16). It is the hallmark of the kingdom of God; the evidence of heaven's invasion of earth enabling God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. It is the evidence that the age to come has already arrived, an age which will be marked by love above all things else (1 Cor 13).

It is one of the paradoxes of Christian freedom that it is to be expressed in service – love's service of God and of others (5:13b). This paradox is wonderfully expressed by Martin Luther when, writing on Christian freedom he says:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject of all, subject to all.

Since the Spirit is the source of Christian freedom, the Christian is called not to live by some burdensome code of a myriad of regulations but:

- to 'live by the Spirit' (5:16a) who has set us free to serve God
- to be 'led by the Spirit' (5:18) into the glorious freedom of the children of God
- and to 'keep in step with the Spirit' (5:25) as he leads us on in following Christ.

It is the Spirit of the risen Christ living in the Christian that is to shape our life so that we might be like Christ.

### **The Fight for Christian Freedom (5:16-17)**

The Spirit has begun a work of making us like Christ, but it's a work in progress. It's rather like an old house that we had become thoroughly used to and, in measure, were fond of but which is now being knocked down and redeveloped into a wonderful new home. We're not always happy with the demolition. There are elements within us struggling to retain bits of the old which we liked so much. So there is a battle going on between our remaining fallen nature and its desires and the Spirit and his redevelopment programme. And it's a battle in which we need to take sides, need to be led by the Spirit (v.18)

Being led by the Spirit is not something vague, mystical and subjective. Look at v 17, "the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want." In so many situations we are torn by two opposing tendencies; to please *myself* and do the things *I want* to do, or to follow Christ and do what we know he would have us do. Which voice are we going to follow? To be led by the Spirit means to follow the call of his voice and to follow Jesus and to stand firm against all of the temptations of the Evil One.

Be a freedom fighter. Follow the lead of the Spirit. Follow Jesus.

## The Shape of Christian Freedom (5:19-23)

What will the life shaped by the Spirit look like? Paul tells us both negatively and positively.

It will not like this, 5:19-21:

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

These are the drives of our fallen nature – of our self-assertive I. These are the things that distort and deface the image of God in us. So avoid these. Do battle against them – each one of them.

But this is what a life shaped by the Spirit will look like, 5:22-23:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

The fruit of the Spirit – note the singular, it is not a list from which we can select those we choose and neglect the others – is:

- **Love** – like the love God has shown us in Christ, a love which is concerned for the other and not for ourselves
- **Joy** – the knowledge that we belong to God and nothing can again separate us from him. We can rejoice in all circumstances, rejoice that our names are written in heaven
- **Peace** – the knowledge that we have peace with God and a sense of his peace in our heart – his Shalom. It is the ability to rest secure in his care
- Forbearance / longsuffering / **patience** – the readiness to face present trials, even unjust treatment, with patience and hope, knowing the glory that is in store for us
- **Kindness** – a recognition of the kindness God has shown us and a readiness to be kind and compassionate towards others in love (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:4)
- **Goodness** – a response to the goodness of God towards us – a generous spirit
- **Faithfulness** – again, a recognition of God's faithfulness (Great is Thy faithfulness...), his unchanging character and being faithful, dependable and loyal in return
- **Gentleness** – the opposite of a self-assertive spirit
- **Self-control** – As love is the foundation of all of these qualities, so self-control is what keeps us on this path as our 'self' is increasingly under the control of the Spirit

A life marked by such characteristics is the fruit of the Spirit's work in us. He is the one who makes us like Jesus, for these qualities perfectly describe his lovely character. It is one fruit in nine flavours, each of which is to shape our lives. Just as the acts of the sinful nature described above are destructive of our relationships with others, so the fruit of the Spirit strengthens the bonds of Christian fellowship.

We need an abundant harvest of this fruit to mark our lives, for the glory of God and for the blessing of others. This is the work of the Spirit within us but it also demands all of our energy, 5:24-25:

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

It constantly requires us to "Put to death ... whatever belongs to [our] earthly nature" (Colossians 3:5) and to deliberately and continually live by the Spirit.

I remember when we used to go on long walks with young people from the church that we attended. Some would find the going rather tiring and would begin to drop behind. When that happened, someone would drop back and walk with them, encouraging them to go on. We are to do the same in the Christian life. We are to keep up with the Spirit for ourselves as he calls us to follow on in the steps of the Lord Jesus just as Israel followed the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. But we are also to encourage one another along the way following our beloved Saviour together. But that is to encroach on the next chapter.

So this is the shape of true freedom – the freedom into which Christ himself has brought us. This is what it means to be free indeed. It is the freedom to live for the glory of God and for the blessing of others. It is to live in anticipation of all that shall be ours when Christ appears as, by faith, we eagerly await the righteousness that will be ours when Christ appears.

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