

This week's section of Galatians is one of the more difficult passages in Paul's letter. Difficult grammatically in the syntax, gender, and uniqueness of the words he chooses, complicated thematically as he seems to transition from one-thought-to-the-next without transitions, and challenging even theologically as Paul implores a somewhat nuanced perspective of a familiar but easily forgotten story. The difficulty of this passage, though does not arise from inconsistency with Paul's line of argument so far—a reasoned argument for us to think about our beginning, ending and maturing in faith through salvation history and ultimately Christ crucified—nor does the complication arise from a novel twist in his argument as if he is adding a new layer. No, this passage is difficult because Paul is arguing with friends. This last section of chapter four is chock-full of emotion. He is pleading with his sisters and brothers via shared and verifiable friendship and love, rather than sequential reason, to not continue forward in a life of slavery masquerading as spirituality or religion. Even his logical appeal to Scripture in the second half of today's text is interpreted, transposed, for its emotional as well as rational weight in his treatise on living freely and lightly by faith. He knows his friends have become emotionally attached to the vision of a good life with God through the "keeping of the law," through moral, cultural, and biblical traditions offered to them by the Judiazers. So, he speaks with emotion, appealing to the mind through the heart.

In chapter 5, Paul will exhale into the final slope of his appeal to live freely and lightly in Jesus, but today, Paul takes in a deep breath, and with the passion of one who truly loves those he is observing walking into a reduction of life, he lets his emotions fill the paper in hopes that—even in this less-than-ideal form of communicating one's heart—the Galatians might grasp his for them, as well God's.

And so, because it could literally take hours to work through the minutia of this passage if we were to try and tear it apart and look at it bit-by-bit; and at the same time, we would lose the emotional weight if we simply pulled out a point or two to emphasize, I will read you the passage in its entirety through a combination of translations, commentaries, cultural insights, etc.; that will—Lord willing—help us grasp the heart of Jesus for us through his messenger Paul.

Martin Luther argued that the Scriptures we have were meant to be heard by ears more than read by eyes. This is true in part because of the limited writing resources and literacy of the first century, but also because listening attentively requires greater use of our minds and more instant connection to our hearts. So, I encourage you this morning to simply listen, and as you listen to pay attention to the thoughts and feelings, memories and words that stand out as you listen attentively.

If you don't think you can stay attentive during 10 minutes of listening, they can open your bible to Galatians 4. We'll start in verse 12 and read through the end of the chapter. While my rendering will fill in some assumed blanks, there will be enough connection points along the way to help you stay in the text. Alright then! Pray with me, then listen up!

## GALATIANS 4:11-31<sup>1</sup>

My dear friends who are being stalked by those who care little for you and your life with God, what I would really like for you to *do* (since I know “what to do” is a question you are longing to answer) is become like me, one who lives under the loving care of a friend. The same love and friendship that I received from you when I put myself under your care! You were very sensitive and kind then. You did me no wrong. You were all aware that the reason that I ended up preaching to you in the first place was that I came down with that repulsive eye ailment and, prevented from continuing my journey, was forced to stop with you. That is how I came to preach to you—not by plan or pride or for prosperity but by the providence of weakness and need. And don’t you remember that even though many people interpreted my illness as some kind of demonic affliction and wanted to “spit me out,” for fear they’d catch the disease or demon, and even though taking in a sick guest was most troublesome and inconvenient for you, you *chose* to treat me as well as you would treat an angel of God (like one of those very messengers the Judaizers say bring the way to righteousness! Don’t you see the irony!)—indeed, you treated me as well as you would have treated Jesus himself if he had visited you. And he did through the gospel and Spirit!

What has happened to the satisfaction you felt at that time—towards both my friendship and the good news of Christ crucified that you received?

I know it was a genuine receiving—with humility, gratitude, and responsibility—for there were some of you then who, if possible, would have traded eyes with me—that is how deeply you cared! And now, have I suddenly become your enemy simply by telling you the truth, dealing with you truthfully as a father in the faith, as a friend?

These two-faced teachers (peddlers of religious wisdom) go to great lengths to flatter you, I know it. They are appealing to what was genuine, your desire for a good and right life with God, saying you can get it through them because you are smart enough, good enough, devout enough to keep in step with their way. Their words are appealing and arguments plausible, but their motives are rotten. They want to shut you out of the free world of God’s grace so that you will always depend on them for approval and direction, making them feel important, giving them security, not you. Can’t you see it?! It is always a good thing to be courted into a relationship *with* honorable intentions, as you were courted by me when I was present with you; but as it is, no sooner has my back been turned than you let someone else come and ‘court’ you with *dishonorable* intentions!

Oh, my children! Do you know how I feel right now and will feel until Jesus’ life becomes visible in your lives? Like a mother in the pain of childbirth! I felt this way the first time we met when I wondered if you would believe the gospel, with the love of a mother for that which was growing insides her but is more than her. I feel like we are going back to that moment, and I am reliving that agony between not-yet-seen and newly breathing life.

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<sup>1</sup> The resources used to put this reindering together include, but are not limited to: Douglas Moo, *Galatians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Timothy Keller, *Galatians for You*; Philip Ryken, *Galatians*, Reformed Expository Commentary; Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light*; and the ESV, NIV, and the Message translations.

I keep wishing that I was with you, then I wouldn't out of sheer frustration be reduced to this blunt letter-writing language. Friendship and love are served by something better than this, but this letter is all I've got.

So, tell me now, you who have become enamored with the law, desiring to be under the law as your "leaders" are demanding of you, have you paid close attention to the law, those first five books of the Bible, the whole Torah like your new "experts" have told you? Abraham—the one lived by faith and whose story tells us that is all God desires of us—you'll remember that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and one by the free woman. Remember that story of Sarah, the wife of Abraham through whom God promised to birth the beginning of a nation to bless the world, though she was old and unable to have children, barren. And the young and fertile Hagar, the slave who forced to marry Abraham to help God along in bring about God's promise.

Now this true story helps us see the truth that is at stake, that truth that divides me (and, Lord willing you) from these "certain men from Jerusalem," and all the teaching about law and Jesus they bring with them. The truth of the difference between slavery and freedom.

Abraham had two sons, the son of the slave woman (Hagar) was born as a result of human effort—you know what I mean!—and cunning for God's sake; the son of the free woman (Sarah), however, was born by God's promise—through trust (faith), and a bit human effort but certainly not by any plan or out of pride!. The two manners of the sons' birth illustrate the very heart of our current issue—our forever problem as people of God. The two births represent two ways of being in relationship with God, two different ways to experience life with God.

One way to experience life with God is from Mount Siani, the place where the law of Moses came to us, this way of life produces children of slavery, just as Hagar was a slave, forced to marry, and who gave birth to a son who was forced to leave when the promised inheritor arrived. That's all you get when try and do for God what God said he would do, and follow those who promote the same...slavery and exile.

Now the mountain that is Siani and that is represented by Hagar is, to be sure, in Arabia, we all know the physical geography. Nevertheless, she (and it) represents the present Jerusalem and the "not gospel, gospel" coming from "those certain men," those who would sell you wisdom without genuine friendship. Hagar, the slave, bears nothing but slave children! And so do those who sell you on a way of life through anything added to a relationship with Jesus.

But the Jerusalem above, that City-of-God promised by Ezekiel who the Judiasizers say they long to see, that promised place where people live with God as God wants, without hindrance, with absolute reverence—is free; she—the vision of life with God from God—is our mother—your mother and mine! That's Sarah in the story, by the way.

After the children for slavery proved they couldn't live under the law without suffering the curse found themselves in exile, the prophet Isaiah—the same prophet who told the future generations to "look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah, who gave birth to you," as hope for our time, said,

Shout with joy, the barren one who has not given birth; break forth and cry aloud, you who was never in birth pains! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who was given to be the wife of a husband.

Now we—those who genuinely desire to follow Jesus, to live rightly with our Father God—like Isaac way back when—are children of the promise—sons (inheritors) of the free woman, heirs of freedom because God acted! But, things continue in similar ways to how they have always maintained. The one born according to a man & woman's idea to do for God what God said he would do, persecute—make life hard and oppressive—for the one born according to the Spirit, so the harassment you are experiencing in soul and mind and body from the two-faced, wisdom peddlers from Jerusalem follows the old pattern. But remember the story from those sacred Scriptures, it tells you what to do, “Expel the slave mother with her son, for the slave son will not inherit with the free son.” Isn't that conclusive! You can't be born of Jesus and be born under the law. Brothers and Sisters, we are not children of the slave—results of trying to do for God what God said he would do, nor ones who follow such bad wisdom—we are children of the free women who trusted—born because God did what only he could do!

Let's pray.

## COMMUNION

Paul's plea is for the Galatians to trust his friendship and the promise of God for the life they desired to live with God, rather than the seemingly prudent wisdom of experts who had no desire to be true friends—to share life with the Galatians through Jesus.

Freedom comes from trusting, not from manipulating the circumstances to achieve the good we desire. Freedom comes from leaving matters to God rather than trying to be in control of what He has promised for each of us—a full and abundant life, an easy yoke and light burden, freedom. We are not whole persons until we are free, and we are not free until we trust.

To his friends and family Paul says,

“Few people are willing, or able, to accept you just as you are and then to encourage you in being who God created you to be and who you can be by God's active mercy. There are open and secret attempts to use you, to manipulate you, to enslave you to someone else's program or agenda or cause or brand. And so, I encourage you to live the life you were birthed into, a life of uninhibited faith, of reckless trust in God, but be warned, don't believe the lies of persons who promise much but give little, who as soon as they get you into their camp and get your name signed on the membership line, or have your money for their books or follows on their podcasts dominating your ear; disappear into the nebulous of the internet or refuse to share their life with you. You wont find deeper freedom from them, only enslavement.”<sup>2</sup>

But Jesus promises much and gave everything—his body and his blood—knowing full well who you are are in your sinfulness and weakness and who you are becoming through being free in him. As Jesus said in John 15, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” He will never leave us nor forsake us but is sharing his life with us even today. Let us receive all that we need from our friend and Savior...in his name...Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 133.