

True Freedom: From Freedom to Slavery

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[0:00] Well, I'm sure that most of us will have found ourselves getting lost whilst we are driving, of trying to find our destination, but having that frustrating experience of going round and round in what seems like circles and just getting nowhere.

The most memorable for me was when we were trying to visit family down in the south of England. They just moved home, and so this was their first time to go and see them. And it was in that part of England, which looks like every other part of England, where all the roads are the same, all the villages are the same, and nothing looks any different from anything else, unlike the beauty of Glasgow.

And we'd never been there before, so we were driving in the dark, having left Scotland in the daytime and the light time, and we were looking around. These were the days before we had sat-nav.

Our sat-nav probably did exist, we just didn't have it in our car at the time. And we'd lost our way, and we were driving and driving, and even though I didn't want to admit it, I did realise that we were lost.

And it hit home to me when we had passed an old English pub called the Black Lion, and I didn't think there would be four pubs that all looked the same and had the same name in the same vicinity in this village in England.

[1:17] But that's the place we kept ending up at and going back to. Now this helps to describe, in some ways, the experience of the Galatians. And it wasn't just that they had lost their way, they were turning back to their old way of life before they knew God.

And so Paul speaks of this in terms of turning from slavery to, sorry, he speaks in terms of turning from freedom to slavery, of turning away from their freedom and turning back to slavery, because they'd been set free by Jesus Christ.

That's what the message of Galatians is about, being set free in Christ. And they were returning to slavery. And it was a slavery because they were submitting to the law with its demand to be circumcised.

And so were becoming enslaved again. And Paul had just told them in his letter that they were no longer slaves, but they were children of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

And now, for all of us, we are all slaves until we are set free by Jesus Christ. And that's what we're going to think about today in this passage, that we're slaves until we're set free by Christ.

[2:30] And so if we are enslaved, then we need to be set free. And when we are free, then we shouldn't turn back to the slavery that we've been released from.

And that's really Paul's concern in this passage. And so what he does is he pleads with the Galatians on the basis of his past history with them. He loved them, and they also had enjoyed a great relationship with the Apostle Paul.

And so Paul is speaking here from the heart. It's very emotional, this passage. So verse 11, he says, I fear for you. Verse 12, he says, I plead with you.

Then verse 20, he says, I am perplexed about you. He is concerned for them. And so he tells them essentially three things in this passage. He says, don't turn back to slavery.

Verse 8 to 11, he says, don't turn away from the gospel. Verse 12 to 16. And he says, don't turn to the wrong people. Verse 17 to 20, don't turn back to slavery.

[3 : 28] Don't turn away from the gospel. Don't turn to the wrong people. And those three points also apply to us, whoever we are today, whether we call ourselves a Christian or not.

And so the first point is don't turn back to slavery. Paul explains why the Galatians were slaves. In verse 8, So before the Galatians were Christians, they didn't know the one true God.

And so they were enslaved to those who by nature are not gods. So they worshipped false gods, pagan gods and goddesses with all kinds of immoral practices.

And that was their lifestyle. And whether they were aware of it or not, they were slaves to their idols. And before we dismiss this as being irrelevant to us today by thinking, well, idolatry is something that is consigned to the ancient past.

Before we dismiss it, being enslaved to false gods isn't just an ancient problem. It's also a modern problem too. Because if we love anything in life more than the God who made us our creator, then that thing is an idol.

[4 : 45] It becomes a false god that we worship. And we can become enslaved to all kinds of false gods or idols, even if we don't realize it.

Listen to how Martin Lloyd-Jones, a former Welsh minister, describes this. He says, An idol can be defined most simply in this way. An idol is anything in our lives that occupies the place that should be occupied by God alone.

Anything that holds my life and my devotion, anything that is central in my life, anything that seems to be vital, anything that is essential to me, an idol is anything by which I live and on which I depend.

Anything that moves and rouses and attracts and stimulates me is an idol. An idol is anything that I worship, anything to which I give much of my time and attention, my energy and my money, anything that holds a controlling position in my life is an idol.

And so that really sums up the Galatians before they knew God. And it resonates with us because we are aware that other things can take priority in our lives before God does.

[6 : 01] And so it helps us understand how we can still be enslaved to idols today. And all sorts of things like power, money, sex, family, work, possessions can take on a God-like status in our lives.

They can become the ultimate things that we are concerned about. And we can become slaves to things that are not gods by living for them, by devoting our time and energy to them, even feeling that we couldn't cope in life without them.

So just one example, if money takes on a God-like status in our lives, then we'll be devoted to earning or getting more money. And so money can then exercise this kind of power over us that controls us to the extent that we are enslaved to it, that money becomes like a master to us.

And so in Galatians, what Paul's saying here is that if we worship anything other than the one true God, then we'll be enslaved to it, even if it's a good thing.

And that's why Paul draws a contrast between the Galatians' former way of life, when they were enslaved to non-existent idols, and their new relationship with God, where he's describing a kind of slavery that they're facing again.

[7 : 19] And we see this in verse 9. He says, But now that you know God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you're turning back to those weak and miserable forces?

Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? So they had come to know God, or Paul says, rather known by God. And that gives a sense that it wasn't the Galatians who took the initiative in getting to know God, but it's God that initiated and established a relationship with them.

And that really is a crucial thing, that God knows us and loves us in a personal way. And so when we're secure in this relationship with God, that God has accepted us, then we won't feel the need to try and earn his approval by the things that we do.

And that's why Paul warns the Galatians about turning back to slavery, the slavery of keeping religious rules, so that God will accept them.

Because what Paul's saying is, not that they were turning back the Galatians to the slavery of their religious, sorry, their irreligious idolatry. What he's saying is, that they're turning back to the slavery of religious observance.

[8 : 35] So they're becoming slaves, not by their irreligion, but they're becoming slaves because of their religion. And Paul calls these things weak and miserable forces, or principles. Because he's saying, you don't need to observe all the rules of the Jewish law.

Verse 10, he says, you're observing special days and months and seasons and years. So they had started as Christians to keep all of these dates in the Jewish calendar, to keep all the festivals.

But Paul's saying that this kind of religion is no better than the irreligion of your past. You're no better off practicing all this stuff than you were when you practiced idolatry, because both are enslaving you.

And that's why he says that they're enslaved all over again. It's just that it was a different kind of slavery. A more respectable looking kind of slavery, because it was religious. So just maybe put it this way.

It's like they'd been set free from one prison, the prison called paganism. But after being rescued and after enjoying their freedom, they then walked back to a different prison.

[9 : 44] And this prison is called religion, with all its rules and rituals and days and festivals. And so it's not just irreligion that enslaves people, but religion can enslave people too.

In fact, if anything, religion is even more dangerous. Because at least those who are irreligious know that by what they do and by how they live, they aren't accepted by God and they're far from him.

Whereas religious people can think that it is about what they do and how they live that means God accepts them. But Paul's saying both are forms of slavery, because both reject God and reject God's way of salvation, which is by faith in Jesus Christ.

And that's why Paul is concerned here. So verse 11, he says, I fear for you that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you. Essentially, he's saying, what was the good of me preaching to you that you are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, if you're now trying to save yourselves by the things you do, by your religious observance?

You're just becoming slaves again. And so we still need to beware of turning back to slavery. And that's what happens when we think that the better our religious performance, then the more acceptable we are to God.

[11 : 13] And we can easily be tempted to think that we need to prove ourselves, either to ourselves or to others or to God, in order for God to love us, in order for God to accept us.

And we can prove ourselves by thinking, if it's my achievements, if I achieve far better. We might think it's our morality that means we're more acceptable to God.

We might think it's our Christian service or any kind of good deeds that we perform. We might use those things as if like their credit in a relationship with God.

God loves us more. We're more acceptable to him by all these things that we do. And yet, if we live believing that these things contribute in any way, to our salvation, then we'll end up being enslaved by them.

That's what Paul's saying here. Okay, so that's the first thing. Don't turn back to slavery. The second thing he's saying, verse 12 to 16, is don't turn away from the gospel. And Paul gets even more personal here.

[12 : 12] Because he cares about the people he's writing to. He loves them. And he's concerned that they're turning away from the gospel. Verse 12, he says, I plead with you, brothers and sisters, become like me.

For I became like you. You did me no wrong. What does he mean, become like me? Well, Paul wants them to become like him in the sense that Paul didn't observe the Jewish law in order to be saved by God.

So when Paul, the Jew, went to the Galatians, the Gentiles, Paul didn't follow the Jewish law. And so he's telling them that they don't need to become like Jews or follow the Jewish law, but they need to be like him, who is free from the law for his acceptance with God.

And he's also appealing to them on the basis of his affection for them. So he says, you did me no wrong. In other words, there's no hard feelings. He doesn't have any hard feelings against them. He had a healthy relationship with these young Christians in Galatia.

And that's why he reminds them of their devotion to him when they met. Verse 13 and 14, he says, 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.

[13 : 29] Instead, you welcome me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Jesus, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. So it sounds like Paul hadn't actually planned to go to Galatia in the first place, but he ended up there because of an illness.

The Galatians knew obviously what the illness was, but we don't. And yet that's what led him to preach the gospel of Jesus to them. Now, they didn't reject Paul or his message, despite Paul's illness and his weakness, but rather they warmly welcomed him.

Paul says they greeted him like an angel. Well, why? Because they recognized that Paul's message was from God. And so they received Paul and they received the good news of Jesus with joy.

But then something changed. Verse 15 and 16, And so can you just hear in Paul's tone, this warm relationship that he had with them had cooled off.

There was a time when they'd have torn their eyes out for Paul, but not anymore. Now they regarded Paul as an enemy. Well, why? It's because Paul says he told them the truth.

[14 : 56] Verse 16, And clearly they didn't want to hear the truth. The false teachers that were troubling the Galatians had turned them away from the gospel they believed in the first place.

So Paul hadn't changed his message. Paul continued to preach the gospel of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, and Christ alone. And Paul's warm relationship with them hadn't changed any.

So what had changed? Well, it was the Galatians who had changed. But Paul loved them too much to just leave them. And so he wasn't afraid to rebuke them.

Now we might think, Well, what does this have to say to us today? What's the application for us? Well, it does still have application for us because we still have churches, and churches still have pastors, and churches still have people.

And so I guess this is where it could be slightly awkward for me as the minister to talk about me becoming your enemy. But it shouldn't be awkward.

[16 : 00] And yet the sad reality is, and we know it's true, that when people turn away from the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, they can often turn against the one who taught them that gospel, as if he now becomes the enemy.

And so what's changed? Well, the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ never changes. And hopefully any minister continues to preach the gospel and continues to love the people he's teaching.

So what's changed? Most of the time, it's people who change, isn't it? Because if people turn away from the truth, they can end up resenting the one who told the truth to them.

And that's what was happening to Paul and the Galatians. They once treated Paul as if he were an angel of God, as if he were Christ Jesus himself. But then it all changed, and they regarded Paul as their enemy.

And I guess, sadly for me, that has been my experience of ministry. Like when someone you've shared the gospel with, that you've helped them grow as a Christian, that you've laughed with and cried with, that you've become friends with, that you've had around your house a whole load of times, that you've pastorally cared for, that you've prayed for, that you've invested hours in, all of a sudden just stops going to church, and there's no explanation.

[17 : 27] And then you contact them, and they just ghost you, never respond to any of your messages, texts, or emails. And all of a sudden, you're left wondering, how did this happen?

I thought we were friends. How come I now seem to be an enemy? And I guess ministers have feelings the same way as everybody else has feelings, and we do get hurt when people turn away.

And I guess it shows just how easy it is to shoot the messenger when we don't like the message. And so when it comes to the truth of the gospel, the messenger doesn't make up the message in the same way that the postman doesn't make up the post.

His job is simply to deliver it. And that's why the main job of any Christian minister is to preach the truth of the gospel to the people that he loves. And if he is preaching the truth, then there's always going to be things that we don't like to hear, things that will challenge us, things that will make us uncomfortable, things that will rebuke us and correct us.

And we won't always like what we're hearing in the same way the Galatians didn't like now what Paul was saying to them. And yet, if the minister is being faithful, then we can surely trust that these things are being said out of love.

[18 : 49] I guess, if I'm honest, at times as a minister, there are things that I would rather not be saying to people. And yet, here we're learning that, well, things need to be said out of a concern for truth within the church and out of a love for people.

And so that's the second thing Paul's saying. Don't turn away from the gospel. Don't turn back to slavery. Don't turn away from the gospel. And then thirdly, don't turn to the wrong people.

So the Galatians were in danger of turning to false teachers. So verse 17 and 18 describe this. 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.

So these false teachers were zealous to win over the Galatians, but their zeal was completely misplaced because zeal means nothing if it isn't grounded in truth, the truth of the gospel.

[19 : 57] And so it was clear to Paul that the false teachers cared more about themselves than they did about Jesus Christ and his people. And instead, they wanted people to follow them and be like them.

And that's why they tried to alienate the Galatians from Paul, to get the Galatians to join their legalistic club, their clique. They weren't wanting to build the Galatians up in faith, the false teachers, like Paul was.

Instead, they were wanting to build themselves up. And that's why the Galatians had to beware of turning to the wrong people. Because clearly, the zeal of the false teachers made them appealing to the Galatians.

Because false teachers always go for style over substance in order to win people. And they always say what people want to hear. And that's why Paul's really saying to the Galatians, they shouldn't have been so naive as to be sucked in by false teachers.

They may have thought that they were following their right path to their spiritual development. But actually, it was a path to destruction, spiritual destruction. And it was only Paul who had the eyes to see what was happening.

[21 : 10] And so the Galatians were being dragged away from the freedom they'd experienced and were being turned back to slavery. And so how does this have application for us today then? Well, it does because we still have false teachers within the church these days.

They're alive and they're well and they're just as zealous. But they're not zealous for Jesus or for people. They're zealous for their own glory, for themselves.

And so they want people to follow them and their particular brand. And so they will want to turn people against other Christian leaders by claiming that they're the ones who've got it right and everybody else has got it wrong.

Ultimately, of course, they care more about themselves than they do about Jesus Christ, about his gospel, and about his people. And so they're dangerous and they do great damage.

But just look at the contrast between what the false teachers are aiming for, what they're trying to do, and what Paul here, the true pastor and teacher, is aiming to do.

[22 : 16] Verse 19 and 20. 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.

So Paul's expressing his pain and his perplexity over the Galatians. Paul loved them because they were his spiritual children. Remember, it was through Paul that they had been born into the Christian faith.

And yet Paul is in agony over them. And he likens it to a mother in the pains of childbirth. Now, I'm no expert on childbirth or labor or any of that stuff.

But I do know that the point of labor is to get the child out fit and well and alive. And Paul's saying here, it's as if there's been some kind of miscarriage with the Galatians and their faith.

That they need to go through this pain of childbirth again. And he is prepared to suffer the pain until he says, Christ is formed in you.

[23 : 20] So he longed to see them transformed into the likeness of Jesus. And he's suffering because they aren't. They're going backwards and getting lost instead of going forwards and becoming more like Christ.

He wants to see them grow up as children of God. But he's saying it's as if we need to go back to the birth stage again at the very beginning. And so Paul's ultimate goal and his concern for them, and it should be the goal and concern of every pastor or minister, is to see these Galatians grow up as children of God.

And so unlike the false teachers, Paul wasn't wanting followers for himself. Paul was wanting followers of Christ. And so he didn't want them to turn back to slavery by keeping religious rules.

He wanted them to grow up and enjoy their freedom in Christ. And that ought to be the desire of every pastor and every minister for their people, to increasingly see Christ formed in us, in them, in you, in me.

Because that's what brings joy and delight. And it is so painful to see people turn away from Jesus. And that's why Paul here is so perplexed about the situation.

[24 : 42] He says he wants to be with them, to change his tone, and to speak tenderly to them. Because here he is rebuking them. Galatians is one big rebuke because they're turning away from Christ.

But he says he wants to be with them and change his tone. So he needs to strongly rebuke them. Why? Because they're turning back to slavery, they're turning away from the gospel, and they're turning to the wrong people.

And so just as we conclude, if we call ourselves a Christian, we need to be careful that we're not tempted to do the same. So these warnings here are also for us.

Don't turn back to slavery. Don't turn away from the gospel. Don't turn to the wrong people. But if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian and you're here today, then please see what it means to be one.

It's not just about adapting your life a wee bit. It is about being set free from slavery. It's about being rescued. Because we are all slaves until we have been set free by Jesus Christ.

[25 : 45] But by faith in Jesus Christ, then we can be set free from our slavery to sin and its condemnation. Let me tell you about one man who was well aware of this.

His name was John Newton. And John Newton never wanted to forget how God had rescued him from slavery. And so he wrote that great hymn, Amazing Grace, which we'll sing in a moment.

And John Newton knew all about slavery. He was a slave trader. And he was involved in the atrocities of the African slave trade. He described himself as a wretch of a man who was far away from God.

And then one day in March 1748, when he was 23 years old, his ship, when he was a slave trader, was out. And there was a fierce storm. And his life was in danger.

And so John Newton cried out to God for mercy. And he found it. He became a Christian, no longer a slave to sin, but a son of God.

[26 : 46] And after he became a Christian, he wanted to remember what he once was and what he had been saved from and what God's amazing grace had done for him.

And so Newton had some words from the Bible written in bold above the mantelpiece in his study. And there were words from Deuteronomy chapter 15, verse 15.

And these were the words. Thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman. In other words, a slave. Thou shalt remember that thou wast a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord thy God redeemed thee.

John Newton knew, not just in his head, but had experienced in his life what it meant to be set free from slavery. And if we'd call ourselves a Christian, we must remember what we once were and what God in his grace has done for us in Jesus Christ to set us free.

Not so that we turn back to slavery, but so that we continue to have Jesus Christ formed in us. That's the goal of life, is to have Jesus Christ formed in us, to become more like Jesus.

[28 : 02] And when we live like Jesus, and when we follow Jesus, we're free. We're no longer enslaved. We've been set free to then live free.

And if you're not yet to see. It's probably técnico. Bye.

Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye. Alright. Bye.

Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye.