

Hope

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Date: 14 January 2015

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[0 : 00] But we're going to begin this new year with four weeks in Paul's letter to the Galatians, just focusing on his teaching in the final two chapters on the Christian life.

It's a life Paul describes for us in this letter as freedom to be used in loving service of our Lord. And so over the next month, we're going to look at the four great pillars of true freedom, as Paul teaches it in this letter, beginning today with hope.

The first 12 verses of chapter five. Now, to catch us up before we read, Paul has spent the last few chapters of this letter showing how everybody in this church who trusts the Lord Jesus, Jew and Gentile alike, has been set free from slavery to legalism and religion.

And now, just like God's true people all down the ages, they're to live a different sort of life, a life of faith in God's promise.

But there are troublemakers in this church arguing for a very different sort of Christian life, and we're going to meet them pretty quickly as we get into the text. So let me read Galatians chapter five.

[1 : 18] That's on page 974 in the Pew Bibles. Galatians chapter five. And I'll read from verse one. For freedom, says Paul, Christ has set us free.

Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Look, I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.

I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ.

You who would be justified in the law, you have fallen away from grace. For through the spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.

For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. You are running well.

[2 : 24] Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is.

But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, as presumably people accuse Paul of preaching, why am I still being persecuted? In that case, the offense of the cross has been removed.

I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves. For you were called to freedom, brothers. Well, let's pray and ask for our Father's help before we turn to look at this together.

Father God, we thank you that in your grace, you have made us as creatures who can hear and consider the very words of our Creator. We thank you that you sustain us this morning with life and breath and the time to respond to your word.

We thank you for the roof over our heads and shelter from the cold and the company of Christian friends with whom we can share the privilege of listening to your voice.

[3 : 43] So we pray that today we wouldn't neglect such a gracious opportunity. For Jesus' sake, Lord, we ask that you would show us where our hearts are clinging on to the wrong things and help us to trust your Son all the more to the glory of your name.

Amen. Long my imprisoned spirit lay fast bound in sin and nature's night. Thine eye diffused a quickening ray.

I woke the dungeon flamed with light. My chains fell off. My heart was free. I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

Galatians is a letter all about deliverance. And just like that great hymn of Charles Wesley, Paul understands the Christian gospel as one of rescue from a dark dungeon of despair.

The great deliverer in this letter, of course, is the Lord Jesus Christ. And the dungeon he bursts open for us is not simply a prison of our own guilt, but it's this entire broken and condemned world.

[5 : 03] Listen to how Paul opens this letter in chapter 1, verse 4. Grace to you from the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from this present evil age.

And it's the very same thought which closes the book in chapter 6, verse 15. Nothing we do, says Paul, counts a joss, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, only a new creation.

The gospel's about being freed from this age and this world into the next. There was a big problem, though. In the church that Paul wrote this letter to, a question mark hung over just how that deliverance works.

There are some things everyone agrees on. Everyone agrees in this church that Jesus initiates the rescue, and he does it undeservedly through faith. And so everyone in this church agreed that the rescue was available to anyone who clung to Christ.

There are a diverse church, people from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds, and they knew that the door to the church had to be open to all. The problem was what came next.

[6 : 25] Having got through the door on Jesus' coattails, how do we finally escape the grip of this evil age? How do we win that final victory over sin?

Now, my guess is that there's not a single person in this room who's been a Christian for more than about five minutes who hasn't looked at their life in frustration and asked that same question.

How do we escape from the grip of our sinful natures? And the answer to that question was what divided the church in Galatia. Not surprisingly, some of the Jewish believers felt that the answer was to go back to their religious roots.

So having begun by the Spirit, as Paul put it in chapter 3, all these new immature converts could now be perfected with a good dose of religion.

What they really needed now, these young Gentile Christians, was a decisive sign that they were going to commit themselves to holiness. A sign like circumcision.

[7 : 37] To prove that they were part of the properly religious group. The group serious about God's law. But on the other side of that argument lay the Apostle Paul.

And he spent chapters 3 and 4 showing Christians in Galatia that they needed more Jewish religion about as much as they needed a bullet in the head.

Because as helpful in answer to holiness as it sounded, Paul understood that if you travel down that road, the gospel itself was at stake.

Because it led people to put their confidence in all the wrong things. Yes, once upon a time, God had set Israel apart and kept her holy until Christ came to deliver all people.

But that age is gone. Jesus came to free his people of all that. To free them from guilt and sin and from slavery to religion. And he didn't care much if that religion was dressed up in pagan clothes or in Jewish ones.

- [8 : 47] And so when Paul gets to chapter 5, he begins with the great war cry of this letter. It's the Braveheart moment of Galatians. For freedom, Christ has set you free.
- So stand firm and never submit again to the rags and chains of a slave. Now just pause for a moment and think about what an odd thing that is to have to say.
- Perhaps you can remember watching those pictures of a frail Nelson Mandela many years ago now as he made that long, slow walk hand in hand with his wife towards the gates of the prison.
- Many things were said on that day, weren't they? People had huge expectations of what lay ahead. Mr. Mandela had a nation to lead and liberate. But the one thing that nobody needed to say to him was don't walk back to prison.
- Don't submit yourselves to apartheid again. He wouldn't have dreamed of it, would he? And yet having spoken for several chapters about the wonderful freedom they have in Christ, that's exactly what Paul warns the Galatians.
- [10 : 03] Don't put yourself back in bondage to guilt and religion. So what is it about your heart and my heart and the Galatians' hearts that Paul knows will draw us back down into the dungeon?
- What's the attraction? Well, the answer which emerges over the final chapters of this letter is that so long as we're alive in this world, the present evil age still has a strong hold on us.
- And if you're a Christian, that can be very, very discouraging. We may have been freed from God's wrath, even adopted as his sons, but the one thing we're not yet free from is the struggle with our sinful flesh.
- If anything, God's spirit just intensifies the conflict we face. The two words which dominate the rest of this letter and war with each other all the way through are the flesh and the spirit.
- And so in the pains of that battle with our own sinful natures, it's natural, isn't it, to look for an easy answer. And the solution many of us latch onto is religion.
- [11 : 25] Just like these Jewish Christians, we want more rules and safety nets and church activity. We want something we can do, something that's practical and tangible to make us feel like we're winning the battle.
- And so we slip back into slavery, which is why we need Paul's cry to liberty so very badly. Jesus did not rescue us so that we could spend our lives trying to look better.
- He freed us, verse one, to live lives of freedom. And it's the final two chapters of this letter which show us what that life of true freedom looks like in this world.
- Now, it's perhaps not freedom in the sense that we often use that word today. The marks of freedom, as Paul explains them, are slightly old-fashioned things.
- Freedom means duty. It means brotherhood. It means sacrifice. And above all, and this is where we'll begin today, freedom means hope.
- [12 : 35] As discouraging as our weak and sinful lives seem, Jesus frees us to hope for something better.
- And the thing which divides freedom from slavery is whether our hope is placed in something real or in something false. The big question in these 12 verses is how that Christian life works, how we live with ourselves in this present evil age.
- And if you ask the Christians in Galatia that question, I think you might have heard two very different answers. And at their heart, the difference was one of misplaced hope.
- One answer was to look inside ourselves, to try and conjure up the determination and resolve to be better. In other words, to place our hope for defeating the flesh in our own flesh, our own sinful nature.

That's the answer religion tries to give, isn't it? But the other answer, Paul's answer, was to wait patiently for Christ himself to do something.

[13 : 49] To hope for the righteousness which he has promised us one day. And although that's real hope, verse five, it's not one we get delivered in this world.

It's a hope we wait for with gritted teeth throughout our Christian life. The first answer was something practical, but imprisoning, to go back to the chains of religion.

But Paul's answer when it comes is something frustrating, yet freeing. the patient life of love and trust in the Lord Jesus.

So let's look briefly then at those two answers as to how us forgiven Christians can live with our weak and corrupt natures. First, let's look at the answer which the troublemakers were pushing in Galatia, something practical, but imprisoning.

That's got to be the attraction of religion, hasn't it? We long for something tangible and hands-on that we can grip to make us feel better about ourselves. We know we're not the people that we long to be, and so we latch on to more restrictions, more rules to make us feel like we're doing something about it.

[15 : 08] It can be so tempting, can't it, to look for reassurance that we're doing okay by measuring ourselves, measuring our performance. Why else would Paul have to urge them so strongly not to go back to the chains?

But look at the danger which he flags up, the danger which lies down that road. He's so solemn, isn't he, in verses two to four? These Christians are in real danger of losing their hope altogether.

because by putting confidence in circumcision or in any stuff they can do, they'd be severing themselves, verse four, from the one true ground of confidence, the Lord Jesus.

Christian hope is not grounded in anything we can do or touch or achieve now. And that message is so serious that Paul has to repeat it.

I, Paul, and warning you about this myself, verse one, I testify again, verse two, if you listen to the legalizers, if you even begin to think it's your Christian activity which makes you something, then your hope in Christ's promise will be of no advantage whatsoever.

[16 : 28] Begin to place your confidence experience in your Christian performance. And verse four, you're severed from Christ. You've fallen away from grace.

That's as true whether the thing that makes you feel secure is circumcision or how well you've controlled your use of the internet this week. Either Christ is all your value or he has no value to you at all.

Do you see what a terribly cruel trick religion plays? It feels like a real answer, doesn't it, to our ongoing struggle. We use it to convince ourselves that we're making progress and growing in godliness.

But if we trust it, we actually end up condemning ourselves. the moment we shift our hope off the future promise of Christ and onto our own performance, God's law blows up in our face.

Treat his law that way, misuse it as a way to keep his favor and you're obligated, verse three, to keep the whole thing as perfectly as Jesus.

[17 : 45] You see, the message these legalizing Christians were pushing was sheer poison. Their answer sounds practical, but the chains of religion were robbing these Christians of their only real ground of confidence.

And that's why Paul's language is so strong. He's right to be angry. I wish, he says, that this circumcision bunch would go the whole hog, verse 12. Emasculate themselves. Why stop at circumcision?

Can you hear his loving concern for the church coming through? This little group of Galatian Christians had been running the race well, but now infection is spreading like gangrene, verse nine, and all Paul can do is hand the troublemakers over to God's judgment.

So what is the answer? If there's nothing we can do to fix ourselves, well, where do we put our hope? hope? The truth, according to Paul, is something frankly rather frustrating, but freeing, and that is the patient life of loving trust in the Lord Jesus.

You see, the cross does give us real, solid hope that we'll defeat that depressingly constant reality of our own sin, our own nasty, selfish natures.

[19 : 09] And if you live in the same world that I live in, and you struggle for just one day to live a better life, well, I expect that sort of hope is something you really do long for.

But there's something we need to know about the sort of hope which Paul's talking about. It's a hope that we have right now for something that is not on offer yet in this age.

For through the Spirit, by faith, verse 5, we eagerly wait for that hope of righteousness. Deliverance from this age and its hold on our hearts is something you and I play no part in.

It's something Jesus does for us. And the life we now live, we live by faith in him. We live like a son waiting to inherit something God's promised us, that was the picture Paul used in chapter four.

And the frustrating thing about that is that some problems will never be fixed in this age. Some things are just so broken that we'll have to live with them patiently until Jesus calls us home.

[20 : 30] But here's the big question. Does waiting for Jesus' righteousness imply that in the meantime we just give in to our own sinful natures? You can bet that's what the religious bunch would accuse Paul of teaching, can't you?

But it couldn't be further from the way he describes the Christian life in this letter. Even that wait for righteousness, verse five, is something we do through the Spirit.

So what on earth does that mean? Well, Paul talks an awful lot about the Holy Spirit in this letter, and there are two key things that he does for us. Firstly, it's the Spirit who joins us to Jesus so that we become sons like he is.

We're joined right now to the one who's already righteous so we can trust that we will one day actually be just like him.

righteous, only not quite yet in ourselves. In the meantime, though, by joining us to Jesus, his Spirit does something else, and that is to pour petrol on our fight with the flesh.

[21 : 50] Christ's Spirit, as we'll see next week, makes us long all the more to be what Jesus already is. And so patiently, painfully, we live dependent on God's grace and trusting that one day he will bring us to perfection.

A day which, as Paul puts it in chapter 6, will come in due season if we don't give up. Now, the truth is that a life like that is not any easier than the life of a legalist.

faith. Paul calls it faith working through love in verse 6, or obeying the truth, verse 7. But what makes it a world apart from the chains of religion is that it looks to Jesus to make us acceptable, not just at the start, but when as even mature Christians, we know that we've stuffed up badly.

you and I can lay our hands on 101 other things, can't we, that make us feel like we're getting ourselves sorted. Bible reading notes, new routines and prayer disciplines and resolutions, computer software and accountability partners, belonging to a solid church that does it all right.

They're all good things, aren't they? But none of it counts for a jot, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision without true faith, only real patient faith working through love.

[23 : 37] I have a young friend who is just facing up to the struggles of a broken sexuality. Perhaps this will be the struggle of his life and he wishes that his desires and attractions were different but they just aren't.

And wouldn't it be tempting for my friend to look for a quick fix? He could lock himself away in a cloister. He could cut himself off from the internet or give money to a crackpot who promises some sort of miraculous cure.

He could read the Bible more and more every day or sit through more and more sermons when he's feeling guilty. But what frustrates my friend the most is that none of those things deal with the heart of his struggle.

And he's realizing slowly that the only thing which will or rather the only person who will is the Lord Jesus when he comes again to make all things new and right.

and that is a hope which he's going to have to wait for with tears and trust and a great deal of patience and there will no doubt be times when he falls and he has to pick himself up out of the dust and thank Christ for his grace.

[25 : 00] But that battle is faith working through love isn't it? The sinner who struggles on because they love the Lord.

That's the Christian response to this present evil age and its grip on our hearts. Friends, waiting and trusting Christ while his spirit works within us is not an easy answer.

There's no secret trick to holiness. But in God's grace it's something he's promised to us. And that means that the Christian life, the life of true freedom, is a life of true hope.

Hope placed in the one who really can deliver what it is we long for. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for what you've promised to make us in your grace by your son.

we're sorry for what we continue to be and for our addiction to quick fixes and human solutions. Help us, Lord, through your Holy Spirit to trust your son and wait with loving patience for his righteousness.

[26 : 22] goodness. To the glory of your name. Amen. Amen. Amen.