

# The Brothers from Another Mother

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, do open your Bibles, would you? And let's turn back to Paul's letter to the Galatians. And our reading tonight is chapter 4, verse 12, through to 5, verse 1, page 974.

We saw last week, if you remember, that Paul's answer to all the insecurity and legalism that was troubling this church was to enjoy what we are in Christ. Not slaves any longer to human religion, but sons of the living God, all of us who trust in him. So we'll continue with his argument, from verse 12 of chapter 4.

Brothers, I entreat you, said Paul, become as I am, for I also have become as you are.

You did me no wrong. You know it was because of a bodily ailment, literally a weakness of the flesh, that I preached the gospel to you at first. And though my flesh was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.

What then has become of the blessing you felt? For I testify to you that if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me. Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out.

[ 1 : 39 ] That you make much of them. It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose. And not only when I'm present with you, my little children, for whom I'm again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you. I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I'm perplexed about you. Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?

For it's written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave, that is Ishmael, was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman, Isaac, was born through promise. Now this may be interpreted allegorically. These women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery.

She is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia. She corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.

For it is written, Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear. Break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labour. For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband.

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

[ 3 : 31 ] 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.

So brothers, we are not children of the slave, but of the free woman. For freedom, Christ has set us free. Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Amen. And may God bless to us this is words. And as we respond to it. Well let me ask you a question I found rather soul-searching this week.

Do you still enjoy being a Christian? I wonder if you think of church as a place full of generally happy people, or as a place for the anxious and the burnt out and the downtrodden.

Is the atmosphere here at the Tron one of joy and excitement and enthusiasm? Or is it something else? Now some of us are just a bit gloomy by nature. We're eeyores, not tiggers.

[ 4 : 45 ] And that's okay. But I think if our general attitude to the church and the Christian life has become a little joyless over the years, then we ought to pause and ask ourselves a few searching questions.

I wonder what attracted you to Christianity right back at the beginning. I think the friend who led me to Christ was one of the most joyful people I'd ever met.

He still is really. He was just so excited to get to talk to me about Jesus. And for whatever reason, it was a joyful thing to listen to him. I couldn't explain it.

But I just love to hear. And then to hear Willie preach, and to hear my release of word leaders explain, it's a joyful thing. I'm sure it was the same for you, wasn't it?

Perhaps you can think of some older Christian friends who are starting to find life harder and harder to bear. And yet so often, the thing that stands out a mile is how patiently, how joyfully they endure it compared to so many others.

[ 5 : 57 ] And it should be a joyful thing to be a Christian, shouldn't it? Look at the poem Paul quotes down in verse 27. It's the song of a barren, childless mother who's bursting with joy at God's wonderful kindness.

But for the people Paul was writing to, I don't think church was a very happy place to be. Once it was, once these Christians were full of hope and love and enthusiasm, but something's gone wrong, hasn't it?

Look at what Paul asks them in verse 15. What's become of the blessing you felt the day I brought you the gospel? Or as some Bibles put it, what's happened to all your joy?

Where has it gone? Well, perhaps you feel like asking the same question. It feels like the joy has begun to leech out of the Christian life. And instead, you think of all the church rotas you've got to remember, and all the prayers you haven't said, and all the people you've let down.

And if that's you, it might not be for the same reason as it was for these Christians, but perhaps it could be. So it's worth just listening in to what Paul's got to say to them.

[ 7 : 15 ] You see, the attitude troubling the churches in Galatia had the effect of cannibalizing Christian joy. And actually, that's rather surprising.

Because the attitude Paul is talking about is one that's all about focusing on your own needs. What he's going to show us here tonight is that religion is not just a way of trying to save yourself, to feel accepted and closer to God.

But actually, at its heart, religion is all about serving yourself. These people troubling the church in Galatia, although they looked very pious and Jewish and devout, were actually driven by their own needs for approval and security and popularity.

And that is the attitude which, in the end, robs you of any true gospel joy. It's the attitude Paul calls slavery.

But because by nature our hearts are curved in on ourselves, that is an attitude which very easily starts to creep up on us. So tonight, Paul is going to compare that attitude to the freedom his own gospel brings.

[ 8 : 32 ] And although that word freedom normally sounds quite abstract and idealistic, Paul is going to ground it very practically in his own life and ministry.

What does it mean to be free? Well, verse 12, it's to become like me, says Paul. Tonight is an extended exercise then in compare and contrast Paul's ministry with the ministry of the troublemakers.

It's Paul's freedom with the slavery of these religious troublemakers. We've got two points then tonight. Two ministries and then their two mothers, second half of the passage.

But behind both of those ministries, behind both mothers, we'll find two very different masters. Let's start then with the two ministries in verses 12 to 20.

One which serves Christ and one that serves self. And strangely enough, it's the one that serves self which ends up robbing us of true happiness.

[ 9 : 39 ] Now you'll notice that the key word in this whole passage is freedom. Freedom in contrast to the slavery of religion, which Paul was talking about last week.

But actually, Paul doesn't use that word freedom until right down in verse 22, where he starts to hit us with it almost every other verse.

And before he gets there, before he introduces his brave heart moment in chapter 5, Paul's going to show us what real freedom looks like. And that's why he begins this section by saying, become as I am.

I think I've only just started to grasp how central Paul's example is in this letter. He is our living picture of real freedom.

So what does it mean to become like him? Well, think back to the very first thing Paul told us about himself in this letter. Really, it's the only thing he's told us.

[ 10 : 36 ] It was chapter 1, verse 10, wasn't it? I'm not seeking the approval of any man. It's Jesus Christ who I serve.

I think that is the definition this letter gives us of real gospel freedom. And to back that up, just look how that makes sense of everything in this first paragraph tonight.

What Paul does is contrast his joyful ministry of freedom to the ministry that's unsettling these Christians in Galatia. And in line after line, what you see is that Paul's ministry is entirely focused on Jesus.

It is Jesus Christ who I serve. But theirs is all about serving human opinion, serving their own flesh. That's their master. And that's what it means to be a slave.

What's Paul's goal? Well, verse 19, it's for Christ to be formed in these young Christians. He wants this church to be secure in Christ.

[ 11 : 40 ] What's their goal? Verse 17, it's that the church make much of them. They want this church to make them feel secure in themselves, to validate them and need them and depend on them.

Two competing goals then these ministries have. So how are they going to get there? Well, Paul's methods are very straightforward, aren't they?

He didn't come to Galatia making much of himself because he wasn't the goal. He came and made much of Jesus. And that meant, verse 12, coming right alongside them.

He became as they were. He didn't need to stand aloof and hide in the vestry and make them feel small. No, he was in their homes and eating around their tables.

In fact, he came weak in the flesh, verse 13, probably beaten up by ministry elsewhere, looking ill and pretty unimpressive.

[ 12 : 43 ] If anything, Paul was a revulsion to most people. Literally, verse 14, his flesh was a temptation to them. He was so far from the pious, photogenic preacher that actually it was a trial not to reject him.

And yet what they saw in him, verse 14, was Jesus Christ. Isn't that an encouragement? When you and I feel totally inadequate, weak, unfit for ministry.

Paul came, made much of Jesus, and the Galatians saw Jesus in him. And even now, as he pours out his heart in worry for them, notice how Paul is all about Jesus.

He doesn't make it personal. It's not me you've wronged, verse 12. No, it's Christ who mattered to Paul. Of course, they had heard him, hadn't they? They were walking right away from his gospel in their case.

But for Paul, it wasn't about Paul. And that meant that if the loving thing to do was tell these Christians some hard truths, verse 16, Paul was able to do it.

[ 13 : 54 ] Of course, he didn't want to lose them. But it wasn't their approval he needed. Well, those were his means. What about them? Well, when your goal is to validate yourself, then the way you treat other people always becomes insincere.

Because you can't let them see your real motive, and you can't ever let them outgrow their need for you. So while Paul was willing to say the difficult things, these troublemakers were terrified of making enemies.

So instead, verse 17, they would flatter these Galatian Christians. They make much of you so that you make much of them.

That's always an easy way to win over a disciple, isn't it? If you want someone in your home group, the easy thing to do is make them feel just a little bit special. We're the serious church, the serious group.

You'll find us a little more deep when it comes to the Bible. And I can see that you would get a lot out of that. There's just something about you, I can tell. You'll fit right in.

[ 15 : 04 ] But notice the real motive, verse 17. They want to shut you out. That's how a ministry based on self-validation works.

People are what you need, so people become far too precious to you. You keep the fellowship tight and exclusive. It's heavy shepherding. You're reluctant to let go of people.

So if they don't want to get on board, or they want to serve in another way, you make the pressure very personal. Unlike Paul, you make sure they know how much it hurts if you let them down.

And although it seems like you're including them in your clique, the truth is you're shutting them out from real confidence, real maturity. To join in with these troublemakers was to be excluded from Paul and his gospel and the real church.

Two ministries then, and Paul says, become like me. What did freedom look like for Paul? Well, it looked like someone who loved, who longed to be able to change his tone, but who didn't depend on people loving him back.

[ 16 : 13 ] It meant freedom from personal hurt. Yes, he was injured and upset, but ultimately because Christ was losing people, not him.

It meant freedom to serve Jesus and encourage the church to find their security in Jesus because he didn't need them all to himself.

And now maybe you can see why I find this passage a bit of a rebuke when I've let myself get into that habit of self-pitying ministry miserablism, always moaning about the Christian life.

Because what does that say about where my joy comes from? My feeling of success. In the end, Christian service that's really about self-saving and self-serving only ends up destroying our love for the gospel.

So let's spend a moment, shall we, to think through what freedom would look like in our own Christian ministries. And then I hope we'll start to see why it's the only real way to joy.

[ 17 : 23 ] Why are we Christians so prone to getting burnt out and exhausted and disillusioned with gospel service? Why do we so easily start to feel unappreciated and negative about everything at church?

Well, one reason might be that we've started to see our ministry, our service, as a way to validate ourselves. Think about what freedom might look like, for example, in someone who leads Bible class on Sunday mornings or who sits on the welcome rotor chatting with visitors.

Surely, for anyone involved in that sort of Christian service, the real joy comes when you see a light bulb going off in someone's mind.

I've not yet found anything in the world more special than that moment when somebody grasps what it means, at some level, to follow Jesus. It is a thrilling thing, isn't it?

And the reason that moment is so beautiful is that before your eyes, you're seeing Christ formed in someone else.

[ 18 : 34 ] A kid in your group or the person washing dishes next to you in the church kitchen. And that moment will never be so special if you need it to feel good about yourself.

What about the times that doesn't happen, when progress is hard and discouraging, when you invite someone to a service and they just change the conversation, when you set up for Christianity explored and then no one shows up?

Well, like Paul, you are going to agonize over that, aren't you? Paul's heart was being wrung by these Galatians. It's not that it was all easy when things didn't go well. But again, notice the difference that freedom makes.

Paul's heart was wrung for Jesus' sake. And that is a sort of agony which energizes, isn't it? It spurs us on to keep trying. But when our motivation starts to slip away from Christ and towards validating ourselves, then that agony has a very different effect.

That's the sort of agony which leads to burnout and discouragement. Because we take the pain so personally. It's my failure. It's me who's missed out on recognition.

[ 19 : 54 ] When people let Paul down, he was able to say, it's okay. There's no bridges burned. You did me no wrong. But if we need people to make much of us, then it'll be very different.

When they let us down or move on, we'll make the pressure personal. When we aren't appreciated, we'll feel personally slighted. And when we're praised for staying late to clear up or leading the group well or preaching a decent sermon, well, we'll take the praise personally too.

We'll start to look for it more and more, depend on it more and more. Freedom is thinking of our Christian service like a son thinks of doing something for his father.

Slavery starts thinking of ministry more like an addict waiting in the queue for his methadone. You're anxious that you won't get what you need.

You're defensive about your rights to get what you want. You're touchy about any change to your script. Anytime someone questions your way of doing things, it feels like an attack on you.

[ 21 : 04 ] And so Paul just needed to take one look at this poor church and he knew something was badly wrong. What's happened to all your joy? Well, having spelled out the difference between these two ministries and how they affect the church, verses 21 to the end expose what lies behind them.

And I think really this is the most ingenious moment in this whole letter. Really, Paul has made his case by now, hasn't he? And he's going to spend the rest of the letter applying what real freedom looks like in the life of a struggling Christian.

And we'll come back to that in a few weeks time. But first, he's going to sum up his whole message to the Galatians in 11 punchy verses. Now, he could have done that by going right back over the whole dense, meaty theological argument.

Instead, though, what Paul does is tell them a story. But it's the sort of story which Jesus himself was the master at telling. One of those stories with an epic sting in the tale.

It's not just a story of two ministries, but two different mothers. Okay, he says, you lot who are so keen to go back to Jewish religion, verse 21, let's listen to the Old Testament, shall we?

[ 22 : 24 ] Why? Because in one way, you troublemakers are right. Yes, there have always been two classes of people in the religious family. Yes, verse 22, Abraham did have two sons, the kosher one and the half-brother.

But you've got it back to front, my friends. Now, in case your Old Testament is a little bit fuzzy, the story he's telling here is the story of Isaac and Ishmael. God had promised Abraham a son through whom the whole world would be blessed.

But Abraham and his wife were childless and old and humanly speaking, the chances of having a son on their own seemed laughable. So in desperation, Sarah persuaded her husband to take things into his own hands.

He slept with Hagar, their slave, and that's how Ishmael was born. But of course, God didn't need their help. And a few years later, the son he'd always promised was born to old Sarah.

Now, God dealt kindly with Hagar and Ishmael, but his promise was never going to come through their human ways. Ishmael ended up as the father of countless Gentile races, but Isaac was the father of God's people Israel.

[ 23 : 48 ] And so you can imagine how Jewish Christians thought of that story, can't you? It's one thing to become a Christian, they'd say, but the real blessing is for Isaac's people, not the half-brothers.

It takes more than a few words to join his family. You've got to become like us, one of us. But hold on a minute, says Paul, because what mattered in that story wasn't genetics, was it?

It wasn't being born the normal human way. In fact, that's how the slave son was born. Ishmael was born according to the flesh, verse 23.

They didn't trust God's promise, and so they took things into their own hands. But Isaac, the free son, he had a supernatural birth.

He was born through God's incredible, gracious promise. That's what makes an Isaac, trusting God's promise. Now, verse 24, let's take a step back from this story and think about you lots, because to me, says Paul, one of you looks remarkably like Ishmael, the slave.

[ 24 : 56 ] One of you is clinging on to Mount Sinai. You're going back to a twisted version of Israel's law and trusting in that obedience to win God's favor.

You're taking things into your own hands. And doesn't that sound a lot like the old human approach to winning God around? And so there comes the sting in the tail.

Who's the mother of your pious, mature, Jewish Christian missionaries? Who's the mother of these people so proud of their ties to the post-church in Jerusalem with all its rituals and traditions and reliance on the flesh, while verse 24, she is Hagar.

To insist on Jewishness is to be a half-blood, a slave. He looks like a brother, but the truth is he comes from another mother.

And you can tell because he relies on his own human resources rather than the loving kindness of your heavenly father. But to trust in God's promise is to be an Isaac, the legitimate son, the spiritual Jerusalem, verse 26, which put its hope in God's coming kingdom.

[ 26 : 18 ] And that is how it's always worked, isn't it? And so in verse 27, Paul quotes a beautiful passage from the book of Isaiah, a first that almost makes you want to cry when you read it in context.

It's a passage about captives in exile, lost in Babylon, without any human hope. And it compares them to old Sarah, the barren mother who'd lost any hope of having a child of her own.

And Isaiah says to those captives, it's okay. Trust God's promise because there is enormous joy just around the corner.

He told them about a suffering servant whose cross would end their exile and open up a new age. And in the very next breath, he sung these words, rejoice, for the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of she who has a husband.

And of course, those supernatural children Isaiah was talking about were these Galatians and millions like them.

[ 27 : 33 ] Every child who would ever be born into this family by trusting God's promises. Old Sarah laughed for joy, didn't she, the day Isaac was born?

And it's as if in verse 27, Paul pictures the old woman laughing all over again, wiping away the tears from her cheeks as one by one she sees these Gentile Galatians joining her family.

I guess she'd be laughing for joy tonight, wouldn't she, to look around at us? What about downstairs in room six? There's a room full of Isaacs, a room full of Sarah's children.

And where do they come from genetically? From Babylon, Persia. Captives from Babylon are joining the heavenly Jerusalem right in front of our eyes.

Isn't that an amazing thought? And even one or two from Scotland. So listen, brothers, Paul says to this troubled Galatian church, it's not the strong or the fertile or the proud who grow God's family.

[ 28 : 46 ] They might look like sons, but they've got the heart and soul of a slave. Whereas you are children of promise. But there's something very important you need to know.

You see, within God's church, there have always been two types of son, ones who trust him and ones who trust their own flesh. Paul's ministry or theirs.

In fact, every human being is either an Isaac or an Ishmael. And right from the start, verse 29, one has always belittled the other.

Just as these fancy Jewish Christians are belittling you. That's how Ishmael persecuted Isaac back in Genesis 21. He laughed at him. Laughed at the idea that God would bless the world through this one little child from a decrepit old mother.

And yet, that child, Isaac, inherited everything. Because, as we've seen all along, there's only one kind of seed. Those who belong to Christ, heart and soul.

[ 30 : 00 ] John Stott makes a very perceptive comment. Listen to this. the persecution of the true church is not always by the world, who are strangers, unrelated to us, but by our half-brothers, religious people, the nominal church.

It's always been so. The greatest enemies of evangelical faith today are not unbelievers, who when they hear the gospel, often embrace it, but the church, the establishment, the hierarchy.

He's right, isn't he? It's the religious person who hates the gospel with the most venom because the gospel will not let me put myself at the center.

So Paul's application is very obvious, isn't it? You don't need what those intimidating Christians have got. The truth is, they need you. That's why they flatter you and draw you close.

It's because, in fact, they're in slavery. So why on earth, verse 1, would you put yourself under their yoke of self-reliance and human approval and joyless, crushing religion?

[ 31 : 17 ] That is everything Christ came to free you from. So either cast out the slave, verse 30, or let them shut you out of his kingdom.

That's his message. Cast out or be shut out. Friends, we need to be very wary of a Christian ministry that seems fixated on itself.

If a Christian writer spends more time defending himself than arguing for the gospel, it's probably time to stop reading him. If a pastor seems more worried about his name or his reputation than the right-hand work of growing Abraham's family, then it might be time to look for a new one.

And if a church is never willing to partner with others, if all that matters is the numbers in its own congregation or the success of the church plants or the glitz of the website, well, then it's time to ask questions.

the essence of dead Galatian religion was not love for God and his law. No, it was the teacher's love for himself.

[ 32 : 34 ] That's what slavery looks like. But what a joyful, liberating thing it is to be free of all of that. I have some friends who once said something that really struck me as embodying that sort of joy.

You see, they'd struggled for years very painfully to conceive a child. And they were talking about how deeply the nurses and doctors they saw just wanted to be able to help.

And my friend said this, they shared in our sorrow those stuff and in the end they shared in our happiness.

well, I think that captures something of where real joy comes from in Christian service. If you and I serve Christ then we have the sheer privilege of seeing sons born out of barrenness, out of despair, born out of God's sheer goodness and grace.

It's not about us, that's the whole beauty of it. We don't need to be validated and appreciated. He loves us too. Every job done by every Christian, mine, yours, the celebrity pastor is a job God's given us to do out of his sheer grace.

[ 33 : 58 ] And that joy is something we can never know while we're slaves to our own service. But if Christ is the center of our hope, our confidence, our ministry, then his joy becomes ours to share.

What a joy that is. Let's pray. Father God, we are so thankful for the blessing we felt when you included us in your beautiful family of grace.

we are so thankful that we found our place not through our flesh but through your promise. So help us, Lord, to live free of the need to feel accepted and well thought of and to live instead for the joy of serving your Son in whose precious name we pray.

Amen. Amen.