

Born Free, Be Free!

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 June 2005

Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] Well, do turn with me, if you would, to Galatians chapter 4. And tonight's message is just summed up, really, in four words.

Born free, be free. So, if you don't get anything else, get that, because that's it. Christianity is not a religion about life in this world, trying to make it a better place.

It's actually a message about salvation out of this world, and the sure hope of a life in freedom and joy in a new creation altogether.

That's the crux of what it means to understand the Christian message. Unless you've understood that, you haven't understood the gospel at all. And that is the crux of Paul's message to the Galatian believers that he's writing this letter to.

And his great argument all the way through the letter is that that fact, that understanding of the gospel has enormous implications for the way that we live now as inheritors of that promise already in the gospel age of fulfillment that we, as New Testament Christians, now live in.

[1 : 16] Just look back to chapter 1, verse 3 and 4, which really sums up Paul's gospel. Everything, he says, comes from grace. It's all through Christ's work.

Christ's work for us. He gave himself for sins, dealing with the past. And the result, Christ's work in us, rescuing us, he says, from this present evil age and for a new life in Christ, for a life of freedom for the age to come.

Turn over to chapter 6, verse 14 and 15, to see that his letter ends exactly where he began. The world, says Paul, has been crucified to me and I to the world.

This age doesn't count any longer. What does count? Well, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision. These are things of the past age. What counts is new creation.

That's my gospel. In a nutshell, says Paul. And in hearing that gospel and in receiving it by faith alone, the Galatians had already begun to experience the life of the new age now.

[2 : 30] How? Well, through the Holy Spirit. Look at chapter 3, verse 2. They've received the Spirit by faith alone. You began with the Spirit, Paul said.

How can you be perfected now by the flesh? Did you experience so many things in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and work miracles among you, do so by works of the law, by faith? They'd received the Spirit by faith alone. And not only did they begin by the Spirit, crucially, Paul is trying to argue all the way through, they go on in the Spirit.

And chapter 5, that we'll come to later on in the summer, tells us about walking in the Spirit now.

Chapter 6, verse 8, he says, ultimately we will reap life from the Holy Spirit if we endure to the end. So the new age life is here in our experience now, by the Holy Spirit alone, by faith alone. And the crux of Paul's argument in this letter is this.

[3 : 38] The Jewish missionaries, those who are coming and agitating the church in Galatia, they are saying, yes, we agree, Paul. We agree that you begin the Christian life by faith alone in Jesus Christ.

Chapter 2, verse 15 makes that clear. We all agree on that, justification by faith. But, where you're wrong and where we're right, say these people, is that to go and experience the full blessings of God, you need more than just that simple gospel of Paul.

You need to become true Israelites, according to the flesh, to inherit the blessings of God. To be truly in covenant with God, you have to have circumcision.

You have to obey these laws about food and things like that. You have to have ceremonies that Moses gave us. In other words, you have to become a Jew to have the full experience of a Christian.

Paul says, no, you're absolutely wrong. You are the ones that haven't grasped it properly. He says the age of promise, that great age as it was, the age of looking forward to the coming of Jesus Christ, that age has now given way to fulfillment.

[4 : 47] The fullness of the time has now come. Do you remember we saw that in chapter 4, verse 4? Christ has come in history. And therefore, the spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ has come into your hearts and experience.

And now that that seismic shift in world history has happened, there can't possibly be any going back to the way things used to be, to things of this age.

To go back like that wouldn't be to be adding things to the gospel of Jesus Christ, to make it better. It would actually be destroying it altogether. Paul says it would make it as if Christ died for nothing. Chapter 2, verse 21. To go back to Moses now, he says, although Moses was a great prophet and a great teacher in his time. Do you remember chapter 4, verse 9 we saw last week?

To go back to Moses now is actually just the same as going into any pagan religion. Yes, stark and shocking as that is, that's the case.

[5 : 55] Paul says Christ is so much the be-all and end-all of everything now that to go anywhere other than Christ alone is to reject the gospel altogether.

So, having in the first two chapters essentially defended himself and his own apostolic authority and given arguments from personal history, and then in chapter 3 and most of chapter 4 expounded the story of salvation from the Bible, from the promises to Abraham right through to Jesus Christ, so arguing theologically from the scriptures.

Now, he having corrected that misunderstanding of the Galatians, now in chapter 4, verse 12, he begins this request section.

He starts to ask them to do things, to live in line with the teaching that he's given to them. He's saying to them, exercise this true freedom that you have in Jesus Christ.

Don't just think about it, don't just understand it, do it, live it. In other words, this is the implication of this gospel truth. It's got to filter from your head into your heart, into your life, into the way you live, the way you do everything.

[7 : 13] And the first section here, from verses 12 to verse 20, is Paul's personal appeal. He's basically saying, do what I ask. Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am.

And then verse 21 to 31, he gives a scriptural appeal. If you don't do what I ask, at least do what the scriptures command. So let's look at these two things then.

First verses 12 to 20, a personal appeal from experience. That's what Paul's doing. Do as I ask, he says. What he's saying to them is, look, see where this theology that you're so taken up with is leading you.

See what its real motive is behind it. That'll be a pretty good clue as to whether it's right or wrong. And that's an important thing to do, isn't it? When people are trying to persuade you of their way of thinking and their way of doing things, coming into our movement.

Well, you need to ask, where is it leading? What are the results? What happens when people do that? Very, very important. So Paul addresses the Galatians here, look at verse 12, very personally.

[8 : 20] He's recalling the history that they had together when he first went to preach to them.

Verse 12 there, he says, you did me no wrong. It sounds as though the Galatians are saying to him, Paul, it's nothing personal.

We don't want to do you any wrong. We don't want to besmirch your name. We're very grateful to you, Paul. It's just that we've moved on. And Paul's saying, yes, you're right, you did me no wrong. But, think about where you're going. Don't just pass me off like that. It's a very sort of common thing that you hear. You hear it these days.

I've heard a number of people often saying, oh yes, I owe a lot to Billy Graham or whoever it was.

Yes, that's how I came to faith. But of course, I've moved on. It's nothing personal about Billy Graham or Joe Bloggs or whoever it is who ministered the scriptures to me.

But, now I've matured. I've become a bit more sophisticated. I've put that simple Bible faith behind me. And Paul won't let them get away with that. He says, no, it's not good enough to just say there's nothing between us.

[9 : 26] There's no bad feeling. No, Paul wants to turn them right back to the gospel and to their reception of it. Look at verse 13. Whatever this illness was that he's speaking about and, again, the commentators will spill pages of ink with all kinds of suggestions there and none of it matters in the

slightest so let's not bother.

But whatever it was, it clearly wasn't an attractive selling point for the gospel. His condition was a trial to them, he says. And yet, they received him with joy.

They received him as though he was an angel. They received him. He says, as though I was Christ myself. That's just an example of what we saw this morning in Matthew chapter 10. The prophet being received as though he was Christ.

And his gospel worked such a liberation among them. Look at verse 15. He says, you would have done anything to me. You would have, verse 14, 15, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.

Well, it must have had some impact on them, surely. That's why some people think it was an eye complaint that Paul had. Maybe, who knows. But what's happened, he says. Where's that attitude gone?

[10:33] Where's all that joy gone? The NIV translation there I think is very stark. What has happened to all your joy? What? What? What? What? What? What? What? What? What? What? How can I become an enemy, he says, verse 16?

When I haven't changed, my message hasn't changed, nothing's changed. How can you be welcoming me as an angel at one time and now as to I'm an enemy? How can that possibly be? How can the person who preaches the gospel to you, who brings about a total change in your life, who transforms your existence, suddenly become an enemy? Well, the answer is in verse 17. Some rivals have come who are very zealous for you, as the NIV says. And for zealous, we should read jealous. They want to alienate the Galatians from Paul.

And so, which were these Galatians to jump? Here's these new people saying, oh, never mind Paul, come to us. And here's Paul saying, no, I want you back. Which were they to jump? It's very difficult, isn't it?

[11:40] Two Christian leaders, two different things. Who are we to follow? Same thing in Corinthians. Are we of Paul or are we of Apollos? How do we decide? What do we do? We see that sort of thing today, don't we?

Well, Paul gives us the contrast here between true gospel ministry, gospel ministry of true biblical grace, and a ministry which may sound very much like that, sound very plausible indeed, and sound very like the genuine article, but in fact, it's quite the opposite.

It's actual bondage. Paul says in verse 12, become like me. And the Judaizers in verse 17 are saying, no, become like us. So which is the genuine article?

Very important question, isn't it? So important for young Christians, young teenagers going off to university or college, any new experience of Christian unions or other churches or all the rest of it. People are vying for their attention. Come and join us. No, come and join us. We've got the thing that really matters. How do you know? How do you tell? How do you tell those who really want your very best from those who are just wanting you to boost their pride and their ego?

[12:59] Well, Paul says, look where it leads you to and look at the motive that lies behind it. See, Paul in verse 12 is saying, become like me, but he's not doing it to try and boost his own particular evangelical empire.

Verse 18, he says, I don't want you to behave well just when I'm around. I want you to do it all the time, not for my benefit. He says, become like me. I used to be a legalist, enslaved, but now I've been set free from bondage and I want you to be free, not enslaved.

I want you to be liberated and joyful like you used to be. I want you to go on in the Spirit just as you began in the Spirit, to walk in the Spirit, to reap eternal life from the Spirit.

I want you to be fulfilling the whole law of God through your life walking in the Spirit, not just a few ceremonies and this and that that make you feel as if you've done something good. I want you basically to live freely so as to give glory to God.

In other words, not for my sake, it's for God's glory. What about these opponents then? Well, it's not quite the same, is it? Look at verse 17.

[14:18] They're very zealous for you, but they want to boost their own movement. They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. But where's it leading?

Well, it's leading into slavery to them, Paul says. Look back to verse 8 that we looked at last week. You're wanting to become slaves to those who are by nature not gods.

All these rules and regulations of men. You want to be enslaved to their laws and their traditions. And these are all things which belong to this miserable age. You've become joyless. You've become at odds with me and the others who preach the genuine gospel to you. Is that really a mark of genuine Christian grace? No, it's the exact opposite of Paul. Paul truly loves them. Look at verse 19. He's in anguish, as if in childbirth. Why? Because he wants Christ to be formed in them.

[15 : 24] His great goal is that they should become mature and grow in Jesus Christ. But they're quite the opposite. They just want their own movement boosted.

And you know friends, that's a very contemporary thing too. It's not just something that was there in the church in Galatia. The point is that there can be language and preaching and theology that can sound very, very orthodox.

It sounds great. But the purpose and the motive is all wrong. It's verse 17. It's all for no good purpose. And ultimately that kind of thing leads only into joyless bondage.

You see it all the time. People praying on young believers. Yes, it's great that you've become a Christian. I'm so delighted about that. But listen to this. What you really need to do is join our church.

Because that church that you're part of is really tainted and not pure. But if you join a pure church like ours, well, that'll give you a great new experience.

[16 : 31] Or what you really need is to come and join our particular church because we have these distinctives in our worship or in our experience. Or maybe it's, well, come and join us because we, not like those ones, can teach you true Reformed theology.

And we can teach you which version of the Bible you really ought to use because that one and that one and that one isn't quite the right thing. I could go on and on and on with endless examples. But all of these things, you see, are zeal not for our growth in the Lord Jesus Christ, not for the glory of God, but for the boosting of the movements, of the positions, of the influence of those who are trying to influence you.

We can more subtly often deceive ourselves by using gospel language and being very, very zealous, but actually we're just harboring a self-centered motive, boosting our own thing.

Paul says that kind of thing is just driving people, killing them, leading them into bondage, losing all their joy. But you see, gospel ministry doesn't flow from zeal.

[17 : 45] True zeal flows out of the gospel, it flows out of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. We've got to beware of any kind of zealous, gospel, pious language that actually takes us away from a focus on the person of the Savior, and have a greater knowledge of him, and a greater love to him, and a greater desire for his word.

Anything that leads us not to these things is leading us into bondage. So verse 19 is very important. There's no substitute for Christ and for his spirit.

He must be formed in you, and any true ministry, and any true message is taken up with, and engaged in forming Christ in you.

So always look through the pious language and ask yourself, what's the motive of this ministry? Is it God's glory or is it man's glory? What's in it for you? And where does it lead?

Does it lead to joy and liberty? Or does it actually lead into oppression, into bondage, into worrying whether you can keep up the standard of these new Christian friends that you've got that want you to do this and this and this and this?

[19 : 01] Naturally, it's becoming a weight upon your shoulders. However orthodox it may seem, and sometimes the more orthodox it seems, the more dangerous it is. However orthodox it might seem, flee from it, says Paul.

Flee from it and become like Paul, free, knowing that what you have in Jesus Christ is everything. You're born free by the Spirit.

So be free. So Paul gives us his personal appeal there, appealing to the history that he's had with these people. And he's done that before in the letter. Now again, as he's done before, he turns to scripture and says well if you won't listen to me and my appeal for my sake, listen to the word of God.

Look what the Bible actually says and do it. Again, get behind the pious sounding language that uses biblical words and phrases and see what the Bible actually is saying.

See what the truth is. Now these verses from 21 onwards some say are the most difficult part of the letter. Seems every new passage we get to somebody says it's the most difficult part of the letter. [20 : 13] But it is a difficult passage and we have to follow it carefully. Verse 21, Paul is saying, okay, you want to be under law. Notice there's no there.

You want to be under law in the sense of rules and regulations and things that you do for the sake of being accepted to God. Well, you who want to be under law, listen to the law. Listen to the Torah, the book of Moses. And you're going to be surprised at what you hear. In fact, you'll find that the law, Moses himself, is going to condemn you and say that you are totally wrong. Even though you seem to love it, you utterly misunderstand it. He's going to show that the law itself is all about promise. It's all about freedom. It's not about bondage and slavery. Never was. He's going to show us that the law itself actually rejects law religion, works religion. Now, look at this argument.

[21 : 14] Just let's look at it in overview first. It has two purposes. Verses 24 to 27 are a bit like a parenthesis that we can miss out for just a second. But Paul has two purposes.

First of all, to confirm to the Gentile believers that they are true children of promise. verse 28, you are children of promise. He's already told them in chapter 3, verse 29, they're heirs according to the promise, that they receive the promised spirit, that they receive it by faith, not by the works of the law.

So that's his point once again. You are children of promise. And secondly, he wants to identify these false teachers as false teachers.

Not as purveyors of an advanced gospel, but actually as Ishmaels. Not even partakers of the promise at all. Verse 30, they will not share in the inheritance of the free woman.

That's Paul's two points. You have it, and they don't at all. They think they've got it and they need to give it to you. Actually, you've got it, and they don't have anything.

[22 : 21] And then on the basis of that, he wants to give them a clear command from the law itself. Verse 30, cast out the slave woman and her offspring.

In other words, utterly reject this anti-gospel teaching, which is no gospel at all. That's the purpose of his argument. Let's follow it through then in five stages.

First of all, in verses 22 and 23, Paul speaks historically from the law itself. Here's a scripture from the Torah that everybody agrees with. Abraham had two sons.

There's no disputing that. One by the slave, one by the free woman. The law is clear. We all agree with that, just as everybody agrees that justification is by faith alone, not by works of the law.

They agree on that, says Paul. They agreed that the relationship to Abraham's line of promise is through Isaac, not through Ishmael. No dispute there. But the crux of the issue in Paul's whole dispute with these other teachers is this.

[23 : 22] What difference does Jesus Christ really make? That's the key issue in all of the letter of Galatians. Is Christ, is the Lord Jesus, just a final bit of icing on the cake, a final bit on the end of the story of Moses and Israel and the people of God?

Is it just a bit extra added onto the Mosaic covenant? In other words, yes, we're all now justified by faith in Christ, but really nothing else much changes apart from that.

In other words, Jesus now points Gentiles as well as Jews back to Moses. That's all that's changed. Gentiles have come into the faith, yes, but Jesus ushers you into the fold of Israel and makes you into Jews.

Is that all Jesus is? Or, according to Paul, is Jesus the climax, the centre, the fulfilment? Everything that it was all moving towards from the very start.

In other words, does Abraham and Moses point everybody, the Jews way back then and now the Jews and the Gentiles together, to Christ for salvation?

[24 : 37] For everything. For the source of the new creation. All one together in him. Now, if that's true, and Paul argues that that is the case, then he says absolutely everything must change.

Because God's story for the world has moved on. Israel as a nation has fulfilled its destiny. It's been superseded by something far greater. What he calls in chapter 6 verse 18, the Israel of God, Jew and Gentile, all one in Christ Jesus.

Something that Israel was always destined to become through the coming of Christ. In other words, you see, once again, ultimately, what we've got here is a clash between a God-centered view of Scripture and the Gospel.

It's all about God, it's all about his purposes, it's all about his glory, and a man-centered view. It's all about man, it's all about his purposes, it's all about keeping him comfortable, him being served by God.

In this case, it's Israel. Is it God-centered or Israel-centered? And Paul has already argued, as we've seen, that the latter is definitely the case. It's all about God. It's all the unfolding plan of his promise that comes to its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

[25 : 53] And that means that the implications for the Galatians and for the Jews is far, far bigger than any of them have realized. You just can't hold these two views together. It's just not something that can be held together.

They're polar opposites. One's pointing forward, everything to Christ, the other's pointing back and saying that really the most important thing is Abraham and Moses. So it's a battle over whether Christ is the goal of everything, or whether Abraham and Moses is the goal of everything. And the battleground that Paul chooses here is Scripture itself, a ground that is undisputed. So historically then he says, here's something we all agree on, a line of promise through Isaac. But now secondly, he turns to this difficult bit about allegory in verses 24 to 26, or figuratively. And at first it does seem as though Paul is making a strange interpretation of Genesis chapter 16. But we've got to keep in mind the context of this letter and who he's arguing with. He's got these opponents who are making appeals again and again and again to orthodoxy, to history, to tradition. [27 : 07] They're saying, we have the story of Abraham, of Moses. We have the Old Testament. We have all this rich heritage that Paul seems to be ignoring. We are the inheritors of Abraham, of Isaac, of the land.

Jerusalem is our mother. We possess the full experience, you see, of all of that, the full glory of everything that God has promised. And they were using their interpretations of the Old Testament to lay great burdens.

To lay great burdens on the Gentile Galatians. They're saying to them, look, you've got Jesus, but you can have more. You can have a fuller, better experience. You can be really free, like us Jews, if only you'll listen to what we're saying.

And Paul's saying, no, no, no, that's totally wrong. What he's saying is, you're free. And they are actually in total bondage.

Now that's an extraordinary thing for him to say. But what he's doing is, he is rebutting the kind of arguments that they're using, and turning it on its head, and showing that they're victims of their own message.

[28 : 20] So what are they saying? Well, they're saying this, we Jews were born in freedom, like Isaac. You Gentiles, are like Ishmael. You've only been brought into the family from outside.

The gospel gets you in, but really, you're still like illegitimate children. But circumcision, and the food laws, and becoming a follower of Moses, that will give you everything that you really need to be kosher, to be right in.

That's the Bible story, they say. It's about Abraham, and Sinai, and Jerusalem. It's about becoming a true Christian Jew. That's what it's all about. Paul's way just rejects all of that great history of the faith.

Look what you're missing out on. That's what they say. But what Paul's saying here is no, the absolute opposite of that is true. Not only are you already totally free by faith alone in Jesus Christ, it's actually those missionaries who think they're offering you more, it's actually them who are illegitimate.

It's them, not you, that need something else. Look at verse 24 to 26 carefully. All right, Paul says, if you want to liken this to two covenants, then that's fine.

[29 : 34] That's what they like to do. So you're quite right that the slave woman bears children for slavery. All right. But here's where you're very wrong. Hagar, he says, corresponds to the present Jerusalem, the Jerusalem of these Jewish missionaries.

And it's them who are slaves, not you. And it's a shock. Paul's saying it's actually these Jewish missionaries who are zealous for the law who are the lawbreakers.

He's saying it's these Jewish missionaries who are so keen to talk about becoming true people of God who are actually the slaves, who are illegitimate.

You think you're very clever, you see, talking about Abraham and Isaac and Jewish people and Nairobi and these sort of things, but actually what he's saying to them, you Jews who think you're

so perfect, you're actually the Arabs.

And we know even in our modern experience what a shocking thing that is. That's what he's saying. He's saying to them, you have perverted the law and totally missed its purpose and you have made it into a thing of bondage and slavery.

[30 : 44] He's not denigrating the law itself. He's already told us the purpose of the law was to lead to Christ. But only until Jesus came. Once he had come, it was a no longer.

Do you remember last time? Paul keeps saying, no longer, no longer the age of guardians, no longer the age of trustees, no longer slaves under the law. Because when the fullness of Christ appears, Jews and Gentiles together have everything by faith.

It's the fulfillment of that promise. Let's be clear. Throughout Israel's history, always there were two reactions to the law of God. There was a reaction of faith, the circumcision of the heart, as Paul calls it, the true Jew, who obeyed out of obedience, out of faith, and out of joy.

And there was the erection of presumption. The Jew who said, well, I'm special because I'm a Jew. I'm proud of it. And the law was hijacked by sin and became a vehicle of denigrating others.

In the hands of grace, God's law leads to Christ by faith. In the hands of sin, it leads to works righteousness and slavery. And sometimes, perhaps, no doubt, it was hard to tell which was which within the community of Israel who was truly circumcised in heart and who was just circumcised in the flesh, just as in churches today.

[32 : 05] It's not easy always to know who's truly a believer in heart and who seems to have a surface faith. But you see, when Jesus Christ himself confronts people, as we see it in the Gospels, it becomes very blatantly obvious, doesn't it?

Here's the Pharisees, on the one hand, zealous for the law and yet confronted with the Lord Jesus Christ. They hate him. Here's others who are humble and when they meet the Lord Jesus Christ, they rejoice at seeing their Saviour.

Two totally different reactions to Moses. That's why Jesus says, if you won't be saved by reading Moses, you won't be saved even if somebody comes back from the dead. If I had a photo in my study, as I do, of my wife and my children, you might take that if you're sitting there and speaking to me, you might look at that and say, well, there's a mark of the genuine love and affection he has for his family.

But it could be completely bogus, couldn't it? I might just have those photographs there to impress you and actually in private I beat my wife and family. I don't actually, please. I'm serious.

But if you were there in person and saw me relating to my family, you would see whether it was true or not, wouldn't you? And when the gospel comes and touches people's lives, it shows up what's the real truth.

[33 : 33] Whether it's just a surface reaction and legalism or whether it's true love to the Lord Jesus Christ. And these, these, these false teachers were acting as if in a sense, Jesus himself had come and they preferred to stay just with a photo of him.

The photo, the law that was pointing and promising all the time to the real thing, they loved better than the real thing itself. So they want to play down the impact of Jesus Christ as a living reality.

In verse 26, Paul is being very clear. We, he says, who have cherished Christ are the true free people. Jerusalem above is our home.

Not Jerusalem in this present evil age. That was never the centre of God's plan. It was always about a Jerusalem to come. That's why the Judaizers were so wrong. And so many people get the gospel so wrong because they never see where it's heading.

It's not just something for this world. It's all about a world to come. The consummation has all its focus in Jesus Christ. It's already begun now.

[34 : 43] It's come in the Spirit. We've got to rejoice because already our home is clear to us if we're in Jesus Christ. But that's what they didn't see.

And Paul says, no, they're still looking for something in this world. They think that's all there is. They've completely missed it. It was always heading as Abraham knew for the city whose architect and builder was God.

A heavenly Jerusalem. a new creation. That's what the Christian gospel is about. And that's why then Paul turns in verse 27 from the law to the prophets to confirm that the law was always looking beyond itself, always pointing further to a great consummation.

He quotes here from Isaiah chapter 54. You all know what's in Isaiah chapter 53. It's all about the restoration of Israel through the servant, Jesus Christ.

Christ. The verses that go on if you read on in Isaiah from this quotation are all about foreigners, Gentiles, eunuchs even being brought into the family of God.

[35 : 48] In other words, the fulfillment of the promises given to Abraham in the law here spoken of in the prophets. And Paul's saying that's what's happening now in the mission of Jesus Christ.

Vast numbers of children, he says, are being born into the kingdom. The barren one is giving forth children for the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Quite apart from the law. Quite apart from Moses through the gospel of Jesus Christ alone. And the Judaizers, you see, these Jewish missionaries had never really grasped where the gospel was going.

They got it wrong on the fact that it was about a new creation and they never really grasped the great scope and expansiveness that this was something for the whole earth, for the whole world, for every tribe and language and people and nation.

You see, they made two fundamental errors and these things are still very, very common today.

Things that emasculate the gospel, things that make the gospel so much smaller than it's really all about.

[36 : 55] But focus it on the here and now instead of the future of glory. First of all, they read the Bible, they understood the gospel as having us at the center, not God.

That we're the focus, that we're the purpose, not just the instrument of God's plans. That God is part of our story rather than us being part of God's story.

And that means that we totally lose the plot, literally, of what the Bible's all about. If your understanding of the gospel is all about you and what God can do for you, you're like these false teachers.

You're thinking about an earthly Jerusalem. you're forgetting where it's all going. And secondly, and it often goes right along with that, we fail to see the overwhelming centrality of Christ and his work as the center of the whole story, as central to the law and prophets, as central to the whole Old Testament and the whole New Testament.

Everything leads to Jesus for life and all life flows from Jesus. He is the all in all of the Christian gospel. You see, when we forget that, Jesus becomes just a part of the gospel on which we hang all sorts of extras.

[38 : 15] And those extras so often become the real focus, the things that we get interested in and give our time to and our thinking to. It's not circumcision and food laws and things like that for us today, but there's plenty of other things, all human things, all things to do with this evil age.

And they're all evidence of the fact that we've really never grasped just how serious and how great sin is, and how great a grace it is from Christ that forgives our sins because we somehow think that we can contribute something, that we can give something, that we can add these traditions or whatever it might be to the gospel, that we must do something to have a little bit more and a better experience.

But all of these things just lead us back into bondage, back into the world. That's why churches get in a mess so often, because when we take Christ out of central place in everything in our thinking, and we put our traditions or our likes or dislikes or our bees in our bonnet into an exalted position, that's what happens.

Politics and church politics become greater than the gospel. Our rules or our particular way of doing things become more important than Jesus Christ and what we have in him.

In other words, our gospel becomes too small. We don't see where it's going, a new creation. We don't see what's at the centre of it, the Lord Jesus Christ, that he's everything. And Paul says, look, you've got to see where the gospel has been going right from the very beginning.

[39 : 53] You've got to see the heavenly reality. You want to see, look, it's already begun in your experience through the Holy Spirit. That's the life you have. You already have it.

Don't give it up. And he tells them in verse 29 that it's confirmed in their experience, and this is the surprising thing, perhaps, which they haven't grasped and which makes them susceptible.

He says the conflict and the struggle that you find yourselves in in your Christian life, and this applies to us as well as to them, the conflict is the proof of it. Persecution, Paul says, is the mark of the promise.

Do you see that? Verse 29. Just as it was then, so it is now. The mark of the promise, the mark of having the Holy Spirit is conflict.

Those born of the flesh persecute those born of the Spirit. It was then, so it is now. We think the opposite. We think if we're having struggles and hardship and difficulties in the Christian life, it must be because there's something more that we need.

[40 : 58] And Paul says, no, the fact that you experience that is the mark of true belief, of being in the light of promise, of having the Holy Spirit, not of being a slave in the flesh out of the line of Christ.

So he concludes in the last few verses there and tells us what we must do Paul says to the Galatians, the only response is a radical one.

Cast out the slave woman and her seed. In other words, cast out this false teaching. Don't listen to them. And don't listen to their words. Because to add to the gospel is to subtract.

It's actually to totally destroy it. It's to make it as if Christ died for nothing. You've got to get rid of any message, however biblically sounding it is.

It says you need Jesus Christ and his gospel and what we've got to offer for a full experience of grace. And that's just as true today as it was for the Galatians.

[42 : 05] Secondly, he tells them in verse 31, you've got to recognize the wonderful security of your position. After all his scoldings, Paul is telling them about the wonder and the glory that's theirs.

He says you're born through promise, verse 23. He says, verse 28, you are the children of promise. Verse 29, you are born according to the Spirit.

In other words, you are free children. You're born to be free. You've got to recognize the wonderful security of what you have as a Christian believer in Jesus.

You've got it now by grace. Through faith alone, you don't need anything else. Therefore, he says in verse 1 of chapter 5, stand firm and be free. You're born free, free.

So be free. Don't let anybody enslave you again. It's possible, you see, to be free, but to live as though you were a slave. To live as though you were a captive, like that story I told you about the Japanese soldier in the Pacific Island.

[43 : 06] For 50 years, the war was over. He was living as though he was still a captive, a prisoner of war. It's possible to do that in your Christian life. That's what Paul is speaking about. No, you've got to realize the liberty, the freedom, the wholeness and entirety that you have in the gospel of Jesus Christ alone.

You're sons and daughters of the living God. You've got his free pass forever. And Paul says, that's the impact of my gospel. That's what it did to you once.

You had that joy, that experience, that liberation. But you're losing it. Going back to bondage. My gospel is a gospel of freedom for the new creation.

And so that verse 15, that test, is a great and important one for us. What has happened to all your joy? Do you have joy in the gospel? Do you have joy in others hearing and believing the gospel? Do you have joy in your heart simply from knowing it and understanding the message? If that's not your experience, if you don't have that liberation of gospel freedom.

[44 : 18] It's not that you need to get something else to add to your faith. You may need less. You may need to get rid of a whole lot of shackles that are taking you back into bondage.

Some kind of thinking that's enslaving you under rules and regulations and expectations. You're free. Are you really living as if you're free in Jesus Christ?

Full of the joy of the Lord? If you're not, then ultimately you've never really properly understood the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Tim Keller was saying last week, you're probably full of that elder brotherishness.

That comes from not understanding, not seeing the joy of the Father's house. Well, if that's you, you need Paul's exhortation. You need to see that you are, if you believed in Jesus Christ, not a child of the slave woman, but of the free.

It's for freedom that Christ has set you free. He doesn't want you to be a slave. So don't live as slaves. Don't let anybody's burden crush you.

[45 : 28] Jesus' burden is easy and light. You're born free. Live as free people. Be free. That's the gospel message for all who've got faith in Jesus Christ.

Don't give it up for anything. For freedom, Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

You can grasp that, and you've got it all. You need nothing else, and you must add nothing else. You're born free, so be free.

That's the message of Paul's gospel. Well, let's pray. Lord, we find it so hard to take in the magnitude of what you've done for us in Jesus Christ.

We find it so hard because we want to add something of our own, to make it feel as though we've done our bit. Please teach us, we pray, again and again, every day, for we need it every day.

[46 : 39] Please teach us the meaning of grace, the depths of your wonderful free gift to us, and the freedom that springs from it.

And if we've been once again tending towards slavery, the things of this world, ourselves or other people's rules, burdens, things put upon us, help us once again to see the liberty that is in Jesus Christ, and to live as you want us to live, as possessors of the joy of your new creation, even now through your Holy Spirit.

We ask it in Jesus Christ's name. Amen. Well, let's sing a hymn