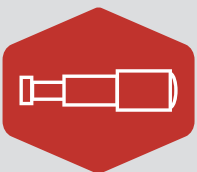




Lesson 10: Free in Christ

Main Idea: Paul pulls back the curtain on his own anguish over the Galatians' condition. He desires for them to continue on as they started—relying on Jesus for right relationship with God. In this lesson, you will discover parallels from Israel's history that correspond to a portrait of being in bondage to the Law, as the Galatians are, or living in freedom under the promises of God.

Scripture: Galatians 4:12–31



The Author's Lens (Spyglass)

What did the Scripture mean to the original author and audience? As you explore information on the author, content, culture, history, land, and language of the Bible, you will gain a better understanding of the intended message of God's Word.

In the previous lesson, Paul explained that the Galatian believers had become God's heirs through Jesus, who redeemed them from the Law. This freed them from trying to keep all of the Law as a way to be in right relationship with God. Now, Paul uses a story about Israel's founding fathers to further illustrate the difference between remaining in bondage or walking in freedom.

Paul indirectly points out the Galatians' folly of reverting to Judaism by reminding them that he has become like them—that he has acted in some ways like Gentiles while remaining in right relationship with God. He remains in right relationship with God, as can they, through the finished work of Jesus on the cross. Paul wants them to also rely on Jesus, not on the taking up of Jewish rites and rules.

Paul first arrived in Galatia with some sort of physical infirmity that actually caused

him to spend quite a bit of time there. Paul's exact ailment remains unknown to this day, and commentators speculate everything from malaria to some sort of eye condition. Verse 13 is a reference to his first meeting with the Galatians, which we can read about in Acts 14: Iconium (14:1-7, 21), Lystra (14:8-21), and Derbe (14:20-21) were all within the province of Galatia.

As the chapter tells, in Iconium, Paul and Barnabas spoke boldly about the Lord for quite some time until a group of Jews, Gentiles, and rulers plotted against their lives, so they fled to Lystra. There, Paul and Barnabas healed a man who could not use his feet, so the Galatian pagans began worshipping Barnabas as the god Zeus and Paul as the god Hermes. When Paul and Barnabas stopped the worship, the people grew angry, and they stoned him, dragged him outside the city, and left him for dead. "But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city [Lystra], and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe" (Acts 14:20).

In verse 14, Paul expresses gratitude that even though his condition "was a trial" to the Galatians, they still received him. It stands to reason that if a person was stoned, their body was going to be quite badly injured. New Testament scholar Craig S. Keener concludes that "the suggestion that provides the most fruitful connections with other material in Galatians, although it remains uncertain, is that Paul refers here to wounds from his experiences of persecution."¹ Paul had been beaten, and the Galatian believers might have run the risk of receiving a similar beating if they helped him.

Paul uses vivid language in verse 15 to convey the self-sacrifice with which the Galatians treated him. They would have "gouged out [their] eyes," bringing to mind their care, welcome, and affection when first meeting Paul. But now, they treat him like he is an enemy because of what he says—which Paul insists is the truth (verse 16), and is not spoken in hostility. Paul then contrasts the Judaizers who are self-absorbed and who puff up the Galatians will false praise (verse 17) so that the Galatians would make much of them. Whereas the Judaizers want the Galatians dependent upon themselves, Paul wants them dependent upon God.

Verse 18 acknowledges that making much of people for good reasons is permissible, but Paul is writing them out of the anguish of a mother in labor, he says (verse 19), because he longs and labors for Christ to be formed in them, rather than for them to be formed in the image of rule-keepers who do not draw closer to God. Paul continues the parenting theme in verse 20. The tone of a parent's voice changes when speaking to children who have gone their own way. Paul loves the Galatians like a parent and speaks in firm tones, realizing part of love is discipline.

¹ Craig S. Keener, *Galatians: A Commentary*, New Cambridge Bible Dictionary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 375.

Paul uses the rest of chapter 4 (vv. 21-31) to discuss the story of Abraham from the Book of Genesis. For context, God appeared to Abraham and made a promise: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation” (Genesis 12:1-2). Later God said, “I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you” (17:6). Abraham said “yes” to God’s promise.

The problem was that Abraham and his wife Sarah were old. Abraham was 75 and Sarah was 65. They had always had fertility issues. If they were going to have children as numerous “as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore” (Genesis 22:17), they needed to start with one child, which had never happened.

Abraham wondered if the child was actually his nephew, but God said no. Then he wondered if it was going to be his trusted servant, but God said no again. Abraham was trying to help God, but he misunderstood: this was not about what *he* could do but about what *God* would do. The promise to Abraham was that he would have a child through his own body. Abraham told Sarah, and in response, Sarah did something that was very acceptable in their culture: Sarah told Abraham to sleep with her slave girl Hagar—whom Paul references in Galatians. Then, if she had a baby, culturally it was acceptable to claim her child as their own. Nine months later the slave girl had a son, and they named him Ishmael, which meant “God has heard.” Abraham believed that Ishmael was the child of promise.

After some time passed, God said something that stunned Abraham: “About this time next year . . . Sarah your wife shall have a son” (Genesis 18:10). Sarah laughed in response. But a year later, Sarah had a baby and they called him Isaac, meaning “laughter.” He was the true son of promise. But where did that leave Hagar and her son Ishmael?

Abraham threw “a great feast on the day Isaac was weaned,” (Genesis 21:8), but Ishmael stood on the sidelines making fun of Isaac. Sarah noticed and told her husband to cast out Hagar and Ishmael, which he did. This sounds cruel to us today, but Keener helps us understand the ancient law system:

In Mesopotamian law, if the slaveholder ever called his son by a slave woman ‘my son,’ the slave son must receive an inheritance with the children of the first wife. If the slaveholder has not called him ‘my son,’ the slave woman and her son are to be freed on the slaveholder’s death, with no claim to the inheritance. Abraham had undoubtedly called Ishmael his son, and those who had accompanied Abraham from Mesopotamia would expect Mesopotamian custom to be

followed unless Abraham specified otherwise. A way to protect the full inheritance for Isaac was to free Hagar and Ishmael now and to send them away before Abraham's decease.²

God told Abraham to go ahead, assuring him that even though Isaac was the child of promise, God would “make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring” (Genesis 21:13).

Paul uses this story to show the Galatians that this was exactly what was going on in the church between the gospel message and the message of the Judaizers: they had people who were true sons of God because of what Jesus had done, and they had people pretending to be true sons of God apart from Jesus—like Ishmael. They immersed themselves in the Law, leaving Jesus out of the picture. The way of the Law was like Hagar, and the way of Jesus was like Sarah. That's why Paul says, “Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise” (Galatians 4:28).

In verse 27, Paul quotes from Isaiah 54:1, which is about the Jewish exiles in Babylon. God spoke through Isaiah to remind people of His promise to them, that they would still receive His promises in His time and would return to their homeland. Paul uses that reference to show the Galatians that when God makes a promise, they can rely on Him. This promise to God connects to God's promise to Abraham—and to God's promise to the Galatians to make them right with Him through Jesus. From Genesis through Galatians (and on through Revelation), the same God makes and keeps His promises.

With verse 29, Paul notes that Ishmael's persecution of Isaac is similar to the Judaizers' persecution and manipulation of the Galatian believers. This ought to give them strength to resist the temptation to forsake Jesus for the Law. Keener sums this up: “The central point of Paul's message is that believers, including Gentile believers, are children of the promise, just like Isaac.”³

By referencing the casting out of Hagar and Ishmael in verse 30, Paul is reminding the Galatians that they should fully reject alternatives to God's promise. Paul uses this story to help the Galatians understand that just like Hagar and Sarah, Ishmael and Isaac cannot dwell together. Neither can freedom and bondage—those walking in the spirit and those walking according to the Law. They cannot walk side by side. God promised the Galatians liberty and freedom by the power of the Holy Spirit so they could be formed into the image of Christ. In the final verse of chapter 4, Paul ends with freedom. God's people have always struggled between remaining free and slipping back into slavery; the Galatians were no different. Here Paul reminds them of their identity, and the choice to stay free in Christ is up to them.

² Keener, 438.

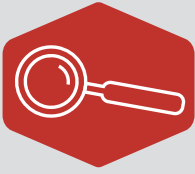
³ Keener, 430.



My Lens (Eyeglasses)

What does this Scripture say to you? Through studying the biblical explanations and principles in the text and bullet points below, you will better understand what God's Word is saying to you today.

- The Gospel sets us free to be right with God through Jesus not our own works (v. 12).
- Satan tests people to see their stumbling, but God desires success in testing (v. 14).
- The depth of a relationship with God will produce a love that is tender but tough (vv. 15-16).
- People of grace are outward-focused, and people of law are inward-focused (vv. 12-20).
- Personal maturity comes as Christ is formed in the believer (v. 19).
- Trying to help God may not help us (vv. 21-31).
- Do not let anyone take your inheritance as a child of God (vv. 30-31).



The Holy Spirit Lens (Magnifying Glass)

How can the Scripture apply to your life? By listening to the Holy Spirit's leading as you answer this series of questions, you can gain useful insights that will help you apply the truth of God's Word to your daily life.

Write down your answer to the following question here or in your journal:

- Circle and write down any recurring words in this passage.
- Who appears in this passage?
- Where is this passage taking place?
- When is this passage occurring?
- Why is this passage important?
- What is happening in this passage?
- How does this passage apply to my life?

- Rate yourself with 1 being very well and 4 not so well in the following areas and write out a plan to improve:
 - » Freedom from guilt and condemnation:
 - » Freedom to be what God has created you to be:
 - » Freedom to enter into God's presence with intimacy, not fear:
 - » Freedom from worry about the future:
 - » Freedom from the fear of failure:
 - » Plan to improve:

- Are you involved with others or isolated? Why?

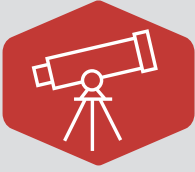
- How are you becoming more generous and faithful?

- Are you competitive or gracious? Why?

- Do you still have the joy of the Lord like when you first came to faith? Why or why not?

- How do you tend to rely on human effort rather than resting in God's promises? Give an example.

- In what ways have you ever been tempted to accomplish God's purpose through alternative means? Please explain.
- Read Philippians 2:13. What do you believe is a proper perspective on the difference between our working *for* God and God working *in and through* us?
- Why do some believers tend to rush ahead in their ability rather than resting in God and operating in His strength? What is the difference?



Upward and Outward Focus (Telescope)

How does the Scripture affect your relationship with God and others? You experience God's Word in action as you use it to direct your journey with Him and those around you. Answer the following questions and record the answers in your journal.

- Take some time to listen to the Lord about the text you just studied. How did these verses help deepen your love for God?

- As a result of your deepened love for God, how can you practically demonstrate this love to others?



Using My *Fire Bible*®

Read the study notes for the following verses and the articles in the Fire Bible and answer the accompanying questions.

- **Galatians 4:13** How does it surprise you that even Christ's faithful followers may also suffer times of ill health, bodily pain, or weakness?

- **Galatians 4:19** What does Paul's analogy of childbirth represent?

- **Galatians 4:22** What do the two children represent?

- **Galatians 4:25** What does Jerusalem represent?

- Look in your *Fire Bible* index for the article titled "God's Covenant with Israel" and answer the following:
 - » Describe your understanding of a covenant.

 - » What are two basic principles of the covenant God made at Mount Sinai?

 - » What did God promise in this covenant?

- » What did God require from the Israelites before He would fulfill the promises?
- » What importance does obedience play with regard to the covenant?
- » What did God say would happen if the Israelites failed to live up to their covenant responsibilities?
- » What did God expect from His people?
- » What did God intend for the covenant to reveal to other nations?
- » What was required for the Israelites to successfully conquer Canaan?
- » Explain the main focus of Deuteronomy.
- » What is the recurring theme throughout Deuteronomy?
- » How were the children of Israel instructed on refreshing their memory about the covenant?
- » Describe the New Testament covenant.

- Look in your *Fire Bible* index for the article titled “The Old Covenant and the New Covenant” and answer the following:
 - » Describe how the old covenant was established.
 - » What is the provision of the new covenant?
 - » What are the aspects of the old covenant?
 - » What are two purposes for describing the aspects of the old covenant?
 - » How did a person in the Old Testament receive salvation and a right relationship with God?
 - » What were three main purposes of sacrifice in the Old Testament?
 - » What are the four reasons Jeremiah prophesied that the new covenant would be superior to the old covenant?
 - » What does *mediator* mean?

- » What are the two purposes of the New Testament message of Christ?

- » What was the purpose of Jesus' death?

- » Who receives the blessings of the new covenant?

- » What does Hebrews reveal about the first covenant?