

Whether you appreciate Paul's argument by way of allegory or not, few Christians today can protest at Paul's famous conclusion of this passage in the next chapter (5:1); 'Christ has liberated us so that we might be truly free! So stand firm, and do not become burdened again by a yoke of slavery.' You may be familiar with the sung version of this; 'it was for freedom that Christ has set us free ...' (based on the Old Authorised Version); but this translation places the emphasis of the sentence correctly on Paul's call to the Galatians, to 'stand firm'. Freedom is not something that anyone willingly gives away, and it should not be so for us. No 'yoke of slavery' befits the Christian soul.

### Application

I am not going to advocate using allegory on the basis of this passage from Paul, because the way that he uses it is a little too difficult even for the many scholars who have attempted to make sense of this passage over the years! We should not forget, however, that Jesus' parables were in part allegorical, and there is every reason for us to find allegory in Scripture where it yields a message consistent with the Gospel which lies at the heart of God's eternal Word. What we can do is take seriously the new points which Paul brings out of this allegory in the matter of fighting off the Judaisers from Galatia. We can easily identify the different forms of slavery which bind Christians today, and our studies have asked us to do this in recent days, but this passage from Galatians suggests that we express our freedom by rejoicing in it. This seems to be the glory of this passage, and it is found particularly in 4:27, 31 and 5:1.

Freedom is both relative and also absolute. Someone who has had a very closed life may well find 'freedom' when they are touched by the love of God and respond to His forgiveness. But they may well discover more freedoms of the Spirit if they grow in the life of faith and discover the gifts of the Spirit, for example. Nevertheless, we should be able to both preach and example that true sense of liberty which all Christians may have, because 'free in Christ', we do not have to be worried about the things of this life in the way that others do. If we are at one with our Lord, then we can be completely confident that He will provide for our circumstances and assist us to make right decisions with good wisdom and discernment. Certainly, if we approach such freedom with irresponsible foolishness, we will discover nothing but the chastisement of God, but why should be afraid to talk about and share the great and glorious liberty of our salvation as a perfect gift which is unsurpassable and completely liberating, in every sense of the word. The world is waiting for this testimony. Who will give it?

### Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group whether you understand the allegory Paul uses, and whether this helps you to understand the freedom we have in Christ.
2. Read through Isaiah 53 and 54 to see how Isaiah's prophecies change from oppression to liberation and freedom. What other examples does Isaiah use?
3. Is Christianity as practised today a religion of freedom or of slavery? How can we make sure that people are 'set free' in Christ Jesus.

### Discipleship

How much freedom do you and I really have today? We are born into certain situations and have to make the best of what happens to us, some might say, so in what senses are we 'free'? If possible, discuss this with a friend or someone at church. It is all too easy for us to 'talk the talk' of freedom without 'walking the walk' of freedom, and a passage such as this should challenge us to look carefully at whether we do indeed act as people who are free in Christ. If there are things in your life which bind you into situations or habits which prevent you from being the person God made you to be, then work at finding your liberty, by the help of God's Spirit!

### Final Prayer

The indefinable love which surrounds us, Lord Jesus, is Yours, and Yours alone; we feel it, and we praise You for it. The amazing power of life which keeps us alive, Holy Spirit, is Yours and Yours alone; we know it, and we praise You for it. The awesome touch we feel is Your presence, and Yours alone, Holy God and Father; we know it, and we praise You for it. Yours is the Kingdom, the power and the Glory! AMEN

### Prayer

Dear Lord; forgive. Forgive our reckless misuse of Your gifts; we have broken the beauty of creation by our pollution, we have harmed the image of God by our religiosity, we have destroyed the mission of the Saviour by denying His body. Will You forgive us, Lord? Help us learn that true confession and repentance comes when we accept the truth of Your eternal Word and our mortal sin. Reveal our sins dear Lord, and forgive: AMEN

### Other Prayer Suggestions

#### Weekly Theme: Local Shops

Pray today for the shopkeepers and businessmen who run the local shops near to where you live. Depending upon your locality, there may well be all kinds of pressures which affect how they operate; for example, legal requirements for storing of food, licensing, advertising agreements, and more. Pray for these matters to be dealt with in honesty and integrity.

### Meditation

Can I stretch my wings and fly?

Is it possible that I have been nourished enough

And must now trust the Holy Spirit and fly on wings of love?

Can I taste the life of 'new wine'?

Is it possible that I have indeed been 'born again'

And must now trust my Lord and King, and seek to follow Him?

Can I eat the bread, the broken body?

Is it possible that I am worthy of the things of God

And must now trust that my Saviour has died for me, for me to live?

Can I open myself to the Kingdom?

Is it possible that I have heard enough teaching

And must now trust the Word of God and speak the truth in love?

The Lord does not raise His children

For them to have a nice life in a comfortable church;

But that His eternal truth might change the world, now and forever.

### Bible Study - Galatians 4:21-5:1

<sup>21</sup> Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to what the law says? <sup>22</sup> For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. <sup>23</sup> The son of the slave woman was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born by means of promise.

<sup>24</sup> Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women represent two covenants. One woman (who is Hagar) is from Mount Sinai and bears children into slavery. <sup>25</sup> Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is enslaved with her children. <sup>26</sup> But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. <sup>27</sup> For it is written, 'Rejoice, barren woman who bore no children; shout and cry out, you who are not in labour! For the one who is deserted will have more children than the one who has a husband!'

<sup>28</sup> Now you, friends, are children of promise just like Isaac. <sup>29</sup> But just as it was back then, the one born according to the flesh persecuted the son born according to the Spirit, and so it is even now. <sup>30</sup> But what does the Scripture say? 'Drive out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman will not inherit together with the son of the free woman.' <sup>31</sup> So, friends, we are not children of the slave woman but of the free woman! <sup>5:1</sup> Christ has liberated us so that we might be truly free! So stand firm, and do not become burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

## Review

This is really an extraordinary text. Most of Paul's letter to the Galatians has been typical of his other letters; full of theology and explanations, and full of appeals to faith and illustrations of the Gospel. Neither is it wholly rare for Paul to become emotional and address his readers personally, pleading with them personally as was the case in yesterday's reading (4:12-20). Our reading today, however, is almost unique in Paul's letters and is therefore quite fascinating, even if it comes as something of a surprise. This passage is a full-blown allegory presented in a way that was typical of the first century and for some time after that, but it is a form of speech and argument which is almost wholly missing from normal English speech and writing today. It therefore needs a little explanation.

In an allegory, the details of an ancient story are read not for their historical or factual value, but by equating the original characters, places and events with other more recent principles, characters, or events in order to make a moral tale for modern times out of an ancient story. For example, we could allegorise the story of the Second World War by saying that one side represented 'evil' and the other 'good', and that 'good' overcame 'evil'. This is a quite powerful and unspoken allegory today, because most western people still believe that if you fight hard enough and get the politics right, then good will win over evil. In our troubled world, it is an allegory which people are realising is not entirely true! The people of Israel, however, deeply believed that by their direct descent from Abraham through Isaac, and later Moses, they were exclusive recipients of God's Covenant blessing, and this deeply seated Jewish belief, rooted in Scriptures, drove the Judaisers to try and persuade Gentile Christians to join their historic descent by means of circumcision, the only route open to them through the Law. We know all this from everything said previously in Galatians; but nothing can prepare us for Paul's bold and quite staggering attack on these assumptions by creating an allegory out of Israel's past history which, quite frankly, ties everything in knots!

The beginning of Paul's allegory is secure enough, and everyone of his own day and most Christians today, know the details. Abraham had two sons; Ishmael who was born naturally by the slave-girl Hagar, and Isaac who was born supernaturally by Abraham's previously barren wife Sarah (4:21-23). In order to illustrate the difference between slavery and freedom, Paul created an allegory around the idea of slavery and bondage through Hagar, and freedom through the 'free woman', which starts simply enough. To our utter surprise and probably to the shock of the Galatians, he went on to equate Hagar with Mount Sinai representing the Law (4:24,25), and also with the 'present Jerusalem' representing modern day Judaism (4:25). We might say 'this is not what Scripture says' because such allegories are quite foreign to us; but for Paul, the allegory stood because each of these elements of the Old Testament story represented 'bondage', and that was how he interpreted Scripture.

By contrast, Paul's positive point was less controversially made; liberty was equated with Sarah and Isaac (4:23), and Paul quoted a stunning passage from Isaiah 54:1 (from just after the prophetic vision of the death of the 'servant' in chapter 53) to justify his belief that the true children of Abraham (the church) would one day outnumber Jews! He then quoted Genesis 21:10 triumphantly to prove from Scripture that the child of slavery be 'driven out' (4:30), which was the gist of his whole letter to the Galatians. His final flourish being the great saying; 'Christ has liberated us so that we might be truly free! So stand firm therefore, and do not become burdened again by a yoke of slavery!'

We can debate the merits of Paul's allegorical technique of analysing Old Testament Scripture, and we should perhaps learn something about its significance, but we cannot escape the power of His conclusion!

## Going Deeper

There is no doubt that this passage presents something of a challenge to the Christian reader. We do not dissent one iota from its conclusions, but we find the way it uses the Old Testament is, to say the least, obscure. Once we have extracted ourselves from our own cultural assumptions, however, there is no reason why we cannot find even more in the text than we have pointed out so far!

### ***The law and the allegory***

At the beginning, Paul challenged everyone from the Galatian churches; he told them that if they really believed in the 'Law', then they should pay attention to what it said (4:21). Now, we do not think of the stories about Abraham in Genesis as 'Law', but we have to remember that the first five books of the Bible were called the 'Torah', which means 'Law'. The best way for us to think of the stories of Genesis as contributing to the 'Law' is to realise that for the Jewish people, these stories contained the 'ground rules' for their relationship with God, through Abraham. So Paul's example from the life of Abraham was indeed a story 'from the law'.

Although we are not used to the way Paul argued his point in this passage, the people of his day certainly were, because the allegorical method Paul used was a classical rabbinical method for discussing Scripture. Today, we are very tied to the idea that the literal truth of 'what happened' is bound up with what we might call 'historical accuracy', but as the allegory Paul created in our passage shows, this was not always the prime concern for people of His day. Paul described the allegory as being about 'two covenants', one of slavery, and one of freedom. This is the first and only place in Scripture where such language is used to describe the difference between what we call the 'Old' and the 'New' Testaments (the word 'testament' is simply the Latin word for 'covenant'), so although this passage is an allegory, it has had a profound effect upon the church! Paul was picking up an idea which was contained within the prophetic tradition which spoke of God creating a 'New Covenant' (e.g. Jer 31:31-34 etc.) because the old had failed. However, Paul did not dwell on this because he was trying to make his argument count by means of the law.

We look at this passage and find it hard to see how Paul could equate Hagar, the slave-girl of Abraham who bore him a son called Ishmael, with the sacred memory of the Law-giving on Mount Sinai and also the city of Jerusalem which people of the day knew and loved. However, what Paul said was that all of these represented an inheritance from Abraham which was worldly, not heavenly. The people who first read this would have understood this. The Law was given on Mount Sinai for earthly reasons to discipline God's people, and the city of Jerusalem was indeed 'enslaved' to this world as Paul pointed out (4:25). Despite its spiritual importance, Jerusalem had been effectively occupied by foreign powers ever since the Babylonians had invaded it in 587 BC. What, however, could Paul make of this argument?

### ***The point of the allegory***

The purpose of the allegory was to illustrate what Paul elsewhere called the 'freedom of the glory of the sons of God' (Romans 8:21). Paul spoke, again for the first time in the life of the church, about a 'Jerusalem above' which 'is free' (4:26)! Where did Paul get this idea from? It is generally reckoned that this was Paul's way of talking about the New Covenant which had begun on earth with Jesus' announcement of the Kingdom of God (Matt 4:17 etc), but which looked forward to a time of completion when Christ would come again when the Kingdom would be complete and there would be a 'New Jerusalem' (Rev 21:2f.)! All of these words are familiar to us, but they represent an understanding of things which gradually developed after the life of Christ, and our passage today is part of that development.

To explain the sense of freedom and liberty he had in mind, Paul quoted from Isaiah 54:1 (4:27) which weaves together the Old Testament theme of the barren woman who eventually bears children, with the theme of God's abundant, covenant promises achieved through His Servant. Paul says by means of this quote that God's promises to Abraham and Sarah are fulfilled in Christ and the Church! We find it hard to think like this because we are not used to treating Scripture allegorically in the way that Paul does here, but this is undoubtedly his meaning.

As a consequence, Paul was able to say to the church at Galatia, 'Now you, friends, are children of promise just like Isaac.' Even as Paul said this, he was trying to get them to extract themselves from the slavery of the law, and he went on to explain that just as Ishmael had taunted Isaac (see Genesis 21) and attempted to prevent the true son of Abraham from receiving his inheritance, so the Judaisers who were teaching them were doing the same. They were taking their true inheritance of freedom away from them. Paul quoted the famous words of Sarah by way of instruction to Abraham for the safeguarding of the Covenant of God; 'Drive out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman will not inherit together with the son of the free woman.' The argument would not have been lost on Paul's hearers; they should get rid of the Judaisers from their midst!