

## Gospel Illustration

### *Galatians 4:21-31*

Legalism is the poisonous blind spot that afflicts the modern believer. One devastating damage that legalism brings to the church of Jesus is the loss of our freedom. We experience the pains of slavery when we misuse God's law.

In urging us away from legalism, Paul draws our attention to the preciousness of our freedom and to the cost Jesus paid to secure our freedom.

*"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1 [ESV](#))*

Let us work our way backwards from 5:1 to see Paul's focus on our freedom.

*"Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods." (Galatians 4:8 [ESV](#))*

*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God." (Galatians 4:4-7 [ESV](#))*

*But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed." (Galatians 3:22-23 [ESV](#))*

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, **who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age**, according to the will of our God and Father, Galatians 1:5 to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen." (Galatians 1:3-5 [ESV](#))*

In emphasizing the joy of freedom, Paul is simply repeating what Jesus said,

*So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free . . . Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8:31-37 [ESV](#))*

What is Christian freedom?

Definition: Christian freedom is the liberty to look to Jesus (and not to the Law) for direction, approval and accountability in our life. Freedom means we are no longer enslaved by our sin's power nor condemned by our sin's penalty. Freedom means that we do not carry the burden to fulfill the Law in order to be wholly loved by God. Freedom means that if Jesus is happy with us, we are happy regardless of who else is unhappy.

**Legalism damages the Christian soul and the Christian church by trading freedom for slavery.**

Question: What do we practically lose if we forfeit our freedom in Jesus to legalism's slavery?

We lose the freedom to care solely about what Jesus thinks of us. Legalism makes us look around at one another and ask, "Are you pleased with me?"

We lose the freedom to avoid church fights that do not matter to God. Legalism forces us into conflicts with one another over diverse disputable matters.

We lose the freedom to feel clean before the Lord. Legalism emphasizes the dirt on the outside and fails to remove the guilt and shame on the inside.

We lose the freedom to humbly confess our sin. Legalism provides a cover for respectable sins that master our hearts.

We lose the freedom to be sanctified by the Spirit. Legalism confides in our own strength.

We lose the freedom to overcome sin. Legalism cracks under the weakness of our own flesh.

We lose the freedom to enjoy God. Legalism points to one more thing that must be accomplished to be loved by God.

We lose the freedom to fix our eyes on Jesus. Legalism places our focus on the Law.

We lose our freedom to possess a positive outlook on people and life. Legalism loves the negative and roots our hearts in prohibitions and offenses.

We lose the freedom to grow in spiritual maturity. Legalism has no ability to help us grow to be complete in Christ Jesus.

We lose the freedom to love people who are weak and failing. Legalism highly esteems those who are strong and successful.

We lose the freedom to pursue our love for God. Legalism places our attention on our activity for Jesus rather than communion with Jesus.

We lose the freedom to feel secure in God's love for us. Legalism keeps under the frown of God's condemnation of sin.

We lose the freedom to love others well. Legalism expands our expectations for others and lures us into frustration, gossip, slander, evil thinking, competition and hostility.

We lose the freedom to live in exuberant joy. Legalism frowns on too much joy.

We lose the freedom to die in peace. Legalism makes us wonder if we have done enough and places our dying thoughts upon our regrets.

We lose our freedom to be generous. Legalism makes us think of God as miserly resulting in our own self-protection rather than generous giving.

We lose our freedom to weep with those who weep and to rejoice with those who rejoice. Legalism makes us compete with others and to measure others by how they benefit our own lives.

We lose the freedom to be creative in the way we live, worship, and serve God. Legalism presses us into a box with man-made boundaries.

I pray that as I share these symptoms of legalism, you see yourself in them. I believe that a spirit of legalism is part of every evangelical believers spiritual war. I certainly see myself in these symptoms. And this awareness helps us move from slavery into the freedom we have in Jesus.

**Main Idea: For freedom Jesus shed His blood to set us free. Let us stand firm in our freedom! Let us resist all influences that would take us back into slavery.**

If you trace Paul's message in Galatians 4, you notice that in verses 1-7 he announces the freedom that flows from our adoption as sons and daughters. Then in verses 8-11, Paul rejoices in our freedom that flows from a personal relationship with God.

Today in verses 21-31, Paul takes us back to the OT story of Isaac and Ishmael to illustrate all that he has been teaching about our freedom.

*"Tell me, **you who desire to be under the law**, do you not listen to the law?" (Galatians 4:21)*

Legalism is attractive to our flesh for many reasons. We should not make legalism an ogre-like caricature that is repulsive to look upon. Legalism is a seductive paramour . . . seeking first to attract our attention and then to charm us

into embracing her. **What is so alluring about legalism?**

Legalism makes us feel safe.

Legalism builds our self-confidence.

Legalism honors our efforts.

Legalism erases complexity.

Legalism appeals to our natural negativity.

Legalism gives us a good reputation.

Legalism looks respectable and righteous.

Legalism seems doable.

Legalism removes the need for humility.

For these reasons and more, there are many in the churches in Galatia and in our church today who **“DESIRE TO BE UNDER THE LAW.”**

In fact, if a pastor wishes to stir up anger in the modern church, he need only do what Paul does . . . confront the spirit of legalism.

To those believers who find legalism appealing, Paul reminds us to look more closely at the Law of God to see what the Law says about the Law.

Paul takes us back to a story that may or may not be familiar to you.

*For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise.” (Galatians 4:22-23 [ESV](#))*

We need to be familiar with the real-life history of Genesis 21-31 to benefit from these verses. So let us take some time to briefly remind ourselves of the story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac.

Abraham is called by God to leave his home and go to a land of promise. Abraham is 75 years old and his wife Sarah is 65 when they receive a covenant promise from the LORD. The Lord promises to bless Abraham by making him into a great nation. This is amazing because both he and his wife Sarah as “as good as dead” in regards in conceiving a child.

The Lord also promises to make Abraham’s name great, and to bless all the families of the earth through him. This is an unconditional promise of grace. Abraham did not so anything to merit this promise. Abraham cannot do anything to lose this promise. God pledges by His own Name that He will bring this to pass.

Ten years later, the promised son has not arrived. Sarah becomes impatient and she suggests a human means by which Abraham will have children

and become a great nation. She suggests that her husband marry their Egyptian servant . . . a woman named Hagar. So Abraham marries Hagar and she conceives. Abraham is 86 years old when he becomes a dad for the first time.

Well, the plan does not work out as Sarah had planned. She now is very jealous of Hagar and treats Hagar horribly. Hagar flees the home for a time, but the LORD tells her to return. So Hagar does.

She gives birth to a son named Ishmael. Hagar and Ishmael live in Abraham's house for the next 14 years.

At age 99, God visits Abraham again and tells him again that he will have a son by Sarah and that this son's name is to be called, "Isaac", which means laughter.

When Abraham is 100 and Sarah is 90, Isaac is born. But Isaac's presence in the home now causes Ishmael to be jealous. And when Isaac is around two years old, the family has a feast for him to celebrate that he is weaned. At this feast, Ishmael openly mocks Isaac. Sarah sees this and demands from Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman and her son . . . her son will not be an heir with my son!"

Abraham does not know what to do now! Everything is a big mess! But God says, "I will take care of Ishmael. I won't let him die. But yes, do what Sarah is demanding you to do." And he cast out Hagar and Ishmael from his home.

Isaac became the nation of Israel. And Ishmael became the Father of the Arab nations.

Paul uses this story as an illustration of the conflict between the grace of God and the works of the Law . . . between the Gospel of Jesus and the legalism of the Judaizers.

*"Now this may be interpreted allegorically:" (Galatians 4:24 [ESV](#))*

The term Paul uses that is translated "allegorically" does not mean what our English word "allegory" means. **I highlight this because the allegorical interpretation of the Bible has been the mother of much strange and damaging teaching throughout church history.**

In allegory, the story told is not real history and has no meaning rooted in the history and grammar of the story. Here the story is real history with a real meaning rooted in real words that carry the meaning.

The allegorical method of interpreting the Bible places the meaning of God's Word in the hands of the interpreters imagination and not in the author's intention and specific words.

Paul is not interpreting this story in a way that denies the real history, nor the historical meaning of this story. He is simply saying that this story serves as a great illustration of his message. For this reason, other translations use a different word to translate Paul's Greek word in this passage.

*"which things are symbolic." (Galatians 4:24 [NKJV](#)).*

*"These things may be taken figuratively," (Galatians 4:24 [NIV](#))*

*"These things are illustrations," (Galatians 4:24 [HCSB](#))*

In using this story as an illustration . . .

Sarah illustrates the grace of God in His covenantal promises.

Hagar illustrates the law of God with its limitations.

Sarah illustrates the heavenly Jerusalem where all are free to enjoy God.

Hagar illustrates the present-day Jerusalem where the legalistic Pharisees keep people in slavery to the Law.

Isaac illustrates the son born after the Spirit of God . . . a miracle child.

Ishmael illustrates the son born by human designs/efforts . . . a natural child.

Isaac illustrates the son who inherits his father's estate.

Ishmael illustrates the son who has no part in his father's inheritance.

*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." (Galatians 4:24-25 [ESV](#))*

The big question for us is, "Whose child are we? Is Hagar or Sarah our mother?"

Hagar's children live enslaved by the Law. Sarah's children live free in God's miraculous grace.

Remember that the argument of the legalist is that their Gospel makes the church members superior to those who embrace the Gospel God delivered through Paul. The legalists argued that their Gospel opened the door to deeper blessing from God.

Paul uses this ancient story to highlight the freedom that God's gospel brings and the slavery that legalism places us under. If you are taking notes, we are going to

consider six qualities that make our freedom in Jesus worth guarding and grasping.

## **Our experience of freedom in Christ . . .**

### **1. Begins with God's grace.**

Even prior to this story of Abraham, we see that every connection we have with God begins with God taking the initiative . . . with God reaching out in grace to provide blessing that we do not deserve.

In the garden of Eden, God provided a promise of redemption and then animal skins to cover their nakedness. Adam and Eve did not deserve a covering for sin.

Prior to the flood, Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. Noah did not deserve the ark.

Abraham did not come to God, but God came to Abraham. The LORD made an everlasting unconditional covenant to bless Abraham and his seed. This covenant is rooted in the Lord's grace and not in Abraham's merit. Abraham did nothing to earn God's favor. The Lord simply set His love on Abraham for reason found only in the LORD's character and not in Abraham's character.

Note in this story, Abraham began with Sarah and not with Hagar. God always begins with grace.

Friends if you are free in Jesus Christ, your journey to freedom began with God's grace in your life. Your freedom did not begin with you seeking God or laboring to please God.

Your freedom began with God setting His love on you while you were sinning against Him. Your freedom began with God choosing you before you chose Him.

*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9 ESV)*

**Legalism fears grace; the Gospel depends upon grace.** Legalism hates the freedom that grace provides. Legalism believes its constraints are necessary.

Legalism says, "Grace is dangerous! Grace will lead you into sin. If you stop focusing on the rules, you will give yourself to impurity and corruption. The whole church will be lost!" I love what Pastor Warren Wiersbe writes . . .

*“Paul’s doctrine of Christian liberty through grace is not the dangerous doctrine. It is legalism that is the dangerous doctrine, because legalism attempts to do the impossible: change the old nature and make it obey the laws of God.” Warren Wiersbe*

God’s grace opens the door to real relationship with God. God’s grace opens the door to real life change. God’s grace opens the door to true holiness. God’s grace opens the door to unity, love and fruitfulness in our church family.

## **Our experience of freedom in Christ begins with God’s grace.**

### **2. Requires a supernatural birth.**

*For it is written, “Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband.” (Galatians 4:27 [ESV](#))*

Paul quotes from Isaiah 54 and highlights that Sarah was Barren. She was 89 with no child. Sarah was a “desolate one” . . . a lonely isolated wife who longed for a child. And by a miracle from God, Sarah becomes the mother of a nation. How can this be?

*“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.” (Galatians 4:29 [ESV](#))*

Every person who enjoys freedom in Christ Jesus has a supernatural birth to credit!

*“Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God . . . Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.””””” (John 3:3, 7-8 [ESV](#))*

Our God is a God of miracles. But the greatest miracle anyone will ever experience or see is the miracle of new spiritual birth.

The Law cannot give life. The Law cannot bring freedom. The Law can only condemn a person with death. Only the Gospel of grace can give life and freedom. This Gospel requires the Lord to work a miracle.

**Question: Have you been born again?**

Being born again is like being pregnant in that either you are or you are not. No one is a little pregnant, almost pregnant or halfway pregnant.

You ask, "How would I know if I am born again?"

**You know by the spiritual life that you experience inside of you and by the spiritual transformation that others see outside of you.**

**Question: Have you experienced the miracle of new birth?**

The Legalists threaten that the Gospel of grace will lead us into a sinful life that is dark and diseased.

Yet we need supernatural life in order to overcome Satan's temptations and our own flesh's corruption. And the Gospel of grace is the only means for us to obtain a new life!

The perplexing matter is that the Galatian believers KNOW that their life began with a miracle from God. Yet now the Legalists have convinced them that they now can live in the power of "trying harder" and "working more" in order to grow in that new life.

*"Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3 [ESV](#))*

We are free to live for God because the Spirit has given us life in Christ Jesus.

**Our experience of freedom in Christ . . .**

- 1. Begins with God's grace.**
- 2. Requires a supernatural birth.**
- 3. Brings joy to the heart of God.**

Notice how Paul emphasizes joy in this passage.

*But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written, "Rejoice," (Galatians 4:26-27 [ESV](#))*

*"Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise." (Galatians 4:28 [ESV](#))*

**WE have noted previously that legalism allows for joy . . . occasionally . . . with care to not overdo it . . . in small portions . . . if you must.**

**The Gospel feeds joy constantly. Joy is a central feature in the lives of those who are living freely in Christ.**

In Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*, the character Jean Valjean finds freedom as the result of escaping prison. He lives in dread of ever going back. One day a bishop shows grace to him by covering for Jean Valjean when Jean is caught by the police with stolen goods from the Bishop's house.

This act of grace motives Valjean to use his freedom for good. His freedom allows him to experience love and joy in his life . . . a love and joy that he would never have experienced had he been bound in prison all his life.

On the other hand, we have Inspector Javert. He is the quintessential legalist who finds joy in nothing. He only cares about keeping the letter of the law. In the end, Javert would rather commit suicide than enjoy grace.

**Friends, joy is the offspring of grace . . . joy is the family trait of those born of the Spirit.**

*"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy," (Galatians 5:22 [ESV](#))*

If we are in Jesus Christ, we have reason to rejoice. If we are in Jesus Christ, we also have resource to rejoice.

Our life in Jesus does not keep us from many sorrows and painful trials. But our freedom in Christ gives us perspective and power. Our perspective is that we are free . . . forever free. Our power is that God's Spirit lives in us and strengthens us to experience joy in every trial.

*Free from the law—oh, happy condition!  
Jesus hath bled, and there is remission;  
Cursed by the law and bruised by the fall,  
Christ hath redeemed us once for all.  
Once for all—oh, sinner, receive it;  
Once for all—oh, doubter, believe it;  
Cling to the cross, the burden will fall,  
Christ hath redeemed us once for all. Philip Bliss*

**Our experience of freedom in Christ . . .**

### **1. Begins with God's grace.**

2. Requires a supernatural birth.
3. Brings joy to the heart of God.

**4. Creates opposition from those enslaved.**

*“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.” (Galatians 4:29 [ESV](#))*

Ishmael was angry at Isaac. The legalist is angry at the grace-centered man/woman.

Legalism and the Gospel are not compatible. Legalism cannot tolerate grace and seeks to destroy it.

Many church conflicts are rooted in the hatred that legalism has for grace.

**Notice that the persecution in this story does not come from outside the family but from INSIDE the family.** While the world threatens the church in various ways, legalism almost always attacks grace from INSIDE the church. From my experience, Bethany has had much much more damage from legalistic opponents inside the church family than from any outside opposition.

Legalism almost always finds something to be against. While grace labors to find something to be for. **And this makes all the difference in our relationships in our families, our church, and our world.**

So what are we to do when legalism and grace are in the same house?

*“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.”” (Galatians 4:30 [ESV](#))*

Paul urges, “Cast out the bond woman!” He is calling on the churches in Galatia to drive out legalism . . . with energy and with intention. There can be no peace between legalism and grace.

I think Paul is urging the church members to drive out a spirit of legalism in their hearts.

But I also think he is calling on the members of the church to drive out the false teachers who have embedded themselves in the community. This is pretty

strong and difficult. They are real people who will not leave without a fight . . . without doing damage. Yet for those teachers who refuse to turn from legalism, there is only one option for the church to enjoy its freedom . . . cast out the bondwoman.

### **Our experience of freedom in Christ . . .**

- 1. Begins with God's grace.**
- 2. Requires a supernatural birth.**
- 3. Brings joy to the heart of God.**
- 4. Creates opposition from those enslaved.**

I am combining the last two qualities that make our freedom in Jesus worth guarding and grasping together.

- 5. Grasps hold of God's promise.**
- 6. Inherits God's eternal blessing.**

*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." (Galatians 4:30-31 [ESV](#))*

An inheritance is a treasure passed down from a father to his children.

**It is not something we can earn, but something we receive as a gift simply because we are born into our Father's family.** God says that when we joined His family through faith in Jesus, we receive an eternal inheritance. Some of that inheritance we enjoy right now. For instance, God's Holy Spirit is a down payment of our inheritance that we enjoy today. But much of our inheritance awaits us in heaven!

**Legalism offers bonuses for working overtime. Grace provides an inheritance that will never fade, diminish or spoil.**

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, **to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.**" (1 Peter 1:3-5 [ESV](#))*

**Principle:** The inheritance God gives to us is never rescinded, never forfeited, never lost.

**Why can it not be lost or forfeited?** The Legalist places our security in our own efforts. But notice Peter's answer, "*(this inheritance is) kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*" (1 Peter 1:3-5 [ESV](#))

God's power secures our inheritance. Not our efforts or resolve. But God's power working in us to keep us from losing our inheritance! What joy! God not only tenderly gives us His grace, but He preserves us all the way to glory.

**Conclusion:**

**Main Idea:** For freedom Jesus shed His blood to set us free. Let us stand firm in our freedom! Let us resist all influences that would take us back into slavery.

*"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."* (Galatians 5:1 [ESV](#))

**Freedom is not freedom to explore and enjoy the darkness.  
Christian freedom is freedom to explore and enjoy the light.**