

STAND FIRM IN YOUR CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

4 ²¹Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not understand the law? ²²It is written that Abraham had two sons: one by the slave woman and one by the free woman. ²³However, the son by the slave woman was born by means of natural procreation; but the son by the free woman was born as a result of the promise [of God]. ²⁴These things contain a spiritual meaning: these [women] represent two covenants—one [represents the covenant] from Mount Sinai, she bears [children] for bondage, that one is Hagar. ²⁵Now Hagar represents Mount Sinai in Arabia and stands for the present [earthly] Jerusalem, for she is in bondage with her children. ²⁶But the Jerusalem that is above is free, she is our mother; ²⁷for it is written, “Rejoice, O barren woman who has borne no children; burst with joy and shout aloud, you who have never experienced labor pains; for more numerous are the children of the single woman than of the woman who has a husband!” ²⁸Now we, brothers, just like Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹But just as it was then—[namely,] the one who was born by natural procreation persecuted the one who was born by the Spirit—so is it [the same] now. ³⁰But what does the Scripture say? [It says,] “Expel the slave woman and her son; for by no means shall the son of the slave woman share the inheritance with the son of the free woman.” ³¹In conclusion, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.

5 It is for freedom that Christ made us free; therefore, stand firm and do not again subject yourselves to a yoke of bondage. ²Listen. I, Paul, am telling you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. ³I testify again to every man who receives circumcision: you are under obligation to keep the whole law. ⁴You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by the law—you have lost the [connection with] grace. ⁵[But] we, by the Spirit [and] by means of faith, are eagerly awaiting the righteousness for which we hope; ⁶for in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any significance, but faith expressing itself through love. ⁷You were running [the race] well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? ⁸This persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. ⁹“A little yeast causes the whole batch [of dough] to rise.” ¹⁰I am confident in the Lord that you will not adopt any other view; but the one who is troubling you will be judged, whoever he may be. ¹¹But I, brothers, if I am still preaching [the doctrine of] circumcision, why am I still being persecuted?—[for] then the offense of the cross has been removed. ¹²I wish that those who are unsettling you would even [go so far as to] castrate themselves. (Gal. 4:21-5:12)

Introduction

Ehrich Weiss was the son of a Jewish rabbi born in Appleton, Wisconsin, in 1874. At an early age Ehrich joined the circus and became a trapeze performer. By the early 1900's Ehrich had given up his trapeze act to become a magician and escape artist.

From the turn of the century until his death in 1926, Ehrich Weiss, who now went by his stage name—the Great Houdini—had an international reputation for his

theatrical tricks and daring feats of extricating himself from shackles, ropes and handcuffs and various locked containers. In a typical act, the Great Houdini would be shackled with irons and placed into a box that was then locked, roped and weighted. The box would then be lifted over the side of a boat and allowed to sink into the river. But the Great Houdini would always manage to free himself and re-emerge to the surface of the water, free from all his shackles and chains. In another exhibition the Great Houdini allowed himself to be suspended, head down, about 75 feet above the ground, in which position he freed himself from a strait jacket (*The Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 11, pp. 751-752.)

But there was an occasion when the Great Houdini failed to escape. He had boasted that there was no jail that could hold him; thus he allowed himself to be secured in the cell of a small town jail. But to his astonishment, the great escape artist discovered that this was one jail cell from which he could not escape! Try as he might, Houdini could not pick the lock. When at last he admitted defeat, the sheriff opened the cell door and let him out. To his amazement, Houdini discovered that the cell door had not been locked; to his frustration, Houdini had been trying to pick open an unlocked door!

On that occasion the Great Houdini had unwittingly allowed himself to be an unnecessary prisoner: trapped in an open jail cell. The Apostle Paul is urging these Galatian Christians not to allow the same kind of thing to happen to them: not to allow themselves to be entrapped in an unnecessary spiritual bondage.

Because Christ has set us free for a life of spiritual freedom, we must stand firm in our Christian faith and not subject ourselves to any form of unnecessary spiritual bondage.

I. Stand Firm in Your Christian Freedom, ...by Understanding the Message of the Scriptures (4:21-31)

The Apostle Paul now addresses those people who “*desire to be under the law.*” He is addressing those who think that they can and must save themselves by their own personal use of the law.

Paul asks all such people a fundamental question: Do you not understand what the law is really teaching?

At this point it is important to understand what the apostle means when he refers to “*the law.*” He is not using the term, “*the law,*” in the narrow sense of the commandments, that is to say, the moral, civil, and ceremonial body of laws recorded in the Old Testament. He is speaking about “*the law*” in its broadest sense; namely, as the first five books of the Old Testament. The Hebrew Scriptures were divided into three parts: the Law (consisting of Genesis-Deuteronomy); the Prophets (consisting of the historical books and the prophetic books); and the Writings (consisting of the poetical books.)

Consequently, the history and promises recorded in Genesis are just as much a part of *"the law"* as are the commandments recorded in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. If one is to truly heed the teaching of *"the law,"* he must pay attention to the whole law; he must pay attention to the entire teaching of the first five books of Scripture.

When one begins to consider the Law in its broadest scope, one begins to see that its teaching is far different than may have been supposed. In its broadest scope, the Law does not teach that a man must try to save himself by his own efforts of seeking to bring his life into conformity with the commandments of God. On the contrary, the Law teaches that our salvation is dependent upon the work of the LORD and our trust in Him.

The Apostle Paul now directs our attention to a crucial passage from the Law—a passage found in the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Law. Paul points out that Abraham had **two** sons. The heretical teachers took confidence in the fact that they were sons of Abraham. But, Paul cautions, one must be clear as to which son he is descended from—if someone tells you that they are a son of Abraham and they can make you an adopted son, it is vitally important to ascertain which line of descent they are connected to, of which son are they a descendent?

The two sons of Abraham each had a different status: Ishmael, who was the child of the slave woman, Hagar, had the status of a household slave. Isaac, the child of the free woman, Sarah, had the status of being the free son and rightful heir of the whole household.

Abraham's two sons are also compared with regard to the source or origin of their birth: Ishmael was born *"by means of natural procreation;"* (i.e.; he was born as a result of human effort.) He was the son Abraham produced with his natural physical relationship with the slave woman Hagar. Isaac was born *"as a result of the promise."* His birth was the result of the gracious working of God and His faithfulness to His promise. The LORD promised that He would give a son to Abraham and his wife, Sarah, and the LORD miraculously caused the couple to bear a son in their old age.

In verses 24-27 the apostle presents the spiritual significance of these Old Testament persons and events: the two women (Hagar and Sarah) who bore Abraham's two sons represent, or illustrate, two different types of covenants. *"Hagar represents Mt. Sinai,"* (which was the place where the Ten Commandments were given.) She is also identified with *"the present [earthly] Jerusalem,"* the headquarters of the heretical teachers who were advocating personal adherence to the law as the way of salvation. Hagar bears children for *"bondage."* Because she was a slave woman, her child inherited from her the status of slavery. Likewise, those who pursue the course of salvation by means of the law are consigning themselves to bondage. The commandments serve as prosecutor, demonstrating us to be lawbreakers, and as jailer, holding us in bondage for final

sentencing, and eventually condemnation, just as Hagar's son, Ishmael, was finally cast out. Sarah, it is implied, represents the covenant of promise the LORD made with Abraham, note Genesis 15:1-6,17-18a,

After these things the word of Jehovah came to Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram, I am your shield, and your reward shall be exceedingly great. ²And Abram said, O Lord Jehovah, what will you give me, seeing that I am childless, and the one who shall inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus? ³And Abram said, To me you have given no offspring; so a servant born in my household is my heir. ⁴Then the word of Jehovah came to him, saying, This man shall not be your heir; rather, he who shall come forth out of your own bowels shall be your heir. ⁵And [Jehovah] brought him out [to the open field] and said, Look toward heaven and number the stars, if you are able to number them. Then he said to him, So shall your offspring be. ⁶And he believed Jehovah; and [Jehovah] credited it to him as righteousness ... ¹⁷When the sun went down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between the pieces [of the divided animal carcasses]. ¹⁸On that day Jehovah made a covenant with Abram. (Gen. 15:1-6,17-18a)

Sarah is also identified with *"the Jerusalem that is above;"* (i.e.; the heavenly kingdom of God.) Furthermore, it is implied that Sarah bears children for freedom. Because she was Abraham's wife, Sarah's son would be born into a status of freedom and would be the heir of his father's household. Also, because Sarah's son, Isaac, was born as the result of the grace and power of God, her son represents all those who are spiritually born by the Spirit of God and inherit the kingdom of God, note John 1:12-13, *"to all who did receive him [Jesus Christ], to those who believe on his name, to them he gave the right to become children of God—¹³they were born, not by natural descent, nor by human will, nor by a husband's desire, but by God."*

In verses 28-31 Paul applies these things to the Christian: As a believer in Christ, the Christian is identified with Isaac—the child who was miraculously born by the Spirit of God and who possesses the sure promises of God (vs. 28.)

Let us stand firm in our Christian freedom, by understanding the message of the Scriptures. The message of *"the Law,"* as revealed in the events recorded in the Book of Genesis, is that salvation is by faith: faith in the Lord, faith in His work on our behalf, and not by our own performance that we must offer unto God. When Abraham relied upon his own efforts to produce an heir by means of the slave woman, Hagar, the result was a child born into the status of slavery and one who was eventually cast out. Abraham was required to trust in the LORD to fulfill His divine promise, and the LORD miraculously did so by providing Abraham and Sarah with a son, Isaac, in their old age.

II. Stand Firm in Your Christian Freedom, ...by Understanding What Is at Stake (5:1-6)

In verse 2 of chapter five Paul warns the Galatians that, if they submit to the heretical teachers' demand that they be circumcised, then Christ will be of no value to them. That is to say, if one chooses the religion of salvation by works, (relying upon one's compliance with religious ceremonies—such as circumcision—and one's personal efforts to conform to the commandments of God,) one is no longer trusting Christ for salvation; consequently, Christ and His work will be of no benefit to that individual.

By way of illustration: You have been traveling down the broad highway that leads to destruction. But now the Holy Spirit has begun to work in your heart: you realize that you are headed in the wrong direction; you become acutely aware of the fact that your course will eventually lead you to eternal agony and misery. You want to come back to God, you want to be restored to God, so you stop dead in your tracks and turn around—you want to take the road that will bring you back to God. When you turn around, you discover that you are confronted with a fork in the road, and at the fork are two signs, identifying the two roads that stretch out before you: the one sign marks the road of "Salvation by Human Effort," the other sign marks the road of "Salvation by Faith in Jesus Christ." As you approach this fork in the road you are met by two figures, each standing by one of the road signs. The one standing beside the road marked "Salvation by Human Effort" offers you religious ceremonies and the Ten Commandments, and urges you to "Try your best." The other standing beside the road marked "Salvation by Faith in Jesus Christ" holds out to you His nail-pierced hands and says, "Come to Me, I died for you, trust in Me." If you choose to accept the offer of the first figure and accept his counsel, then Christ is not going to be of any benefit to you—Christ will only be of value to you if you come to Him and trust in Him: *"to all who did receive him, ... to them he gave the right to become children of God"* (Jn. 1:12.)

In verse 3 Paul further warns his readers that if one chooses the way of "Salvation by Human Effort" he is obligating himself to keep the whole law perfectly in order to be saved. When you embark on that road you are in fact saying, "Dear God, I am taking it upon myself to do whatever will make me acceptable in Your sight. Tell me what I must do and I will try my best to do it." But we must listen to how God replies to such a man: O sincere, but foolish man; what I must require of you is not merely the compliance with some superficial religious ceremonies, and not merely the abstinence from some obvious moral vices. What My holy nature demands is absolute conformity to all of My holy law!" Note Galatians 3:10, a passage in which the Apostle Paul is quoting Deuteronomy 27:26, *"it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not abide by everything that is written in the book of the law, [being faithful] to do them.'"* Unless you are able to render absolute, flawless obedience to all the commandments of God, you do not want to embark on the road marked "Salvation by Human Effort," because that course eventually leads to eternal disaster.

In verse 4 Paul states it bluntly: If you choose the course of “Salvation by Works” you are separated from Christ and separated from grace. If you travel that road you will find that you are left to yourself and to the justice of God. All along that road you will encounter signs that read, “Commandments strictly enforced—violators will be prosecuted to the full limit of the law.” You will not find Christ beside you and your pleas for mercy will go unheeded, because the justice of God cannot be denied or compromised.

Let us stand firm in our Christian freedom, by understanding what is at stake. The road marked “Salvation by Works” eventually leads to condemnation. The heretical teachers were urging these Gentiles to become circumcised in order to be saved, but Paul warns them that submission to circumcision is just the first step on the road that requires a man to offer total obedience to God if he hopes to be saved, note Romans 2:25, *“Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised.”*

But the road marked “Salvation by Faith in Jesus Christ” is the sure road of life; as Paul writes in Galatians 3:13, *“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.’”* Note, also, Romans 8:1-4,

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ²because through Christ Jesus the principle of the Spirit of life set me free from the principle of sin and death. ³What the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature [i.e.; the law was powerless to create obedience in sinful man, obedience that would have enabled men to meet the law’s demand of holiness], God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man [by His sacrificial death on the cross of Calvary, Jesus met the law’s demand of justice on behalf of all who trust in Him], ⁴in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit [by virtue of our union with Christ and by the work of the Holy Spirit in us, the law’s requirements of righteousness will be fulfilled in us]. (Rom. 8:1-4)

III. Stand Firm in Your Christian Freedom, ..by Being on Guard against Teaching that Brings Bondage (5:7-12)

“You were running [the race] well,” declares the Apostle Paul in verse 7. These Galatian people had heard the gospel, they had put their faith in Jesus Christ, and they had been advancing along the roadway of “Salvation by Faith.”

But now the apostle must inquire, *“Who hindered you?”* He is inquiring, Who put up a roadblock, who is persuading you to turn around and go back to that initial fork in the road and enter upon that other course marked “Salvation by Human Effort”? The answer is well-known to the apostle: it is those men who were

Pharisees, who acknowledged Jesus to be the Messiah by virtue of His resurrection, but who never understood the gospel and never left behind their old religion of self-effort—now they were seeking to pollute the Christian church with their poisonous teaching.

“This persuasion [or, teaching] does not come from the one who calls you.” Any teaching that minimizes the cross of Christ—its necessity, its sufficiency, its centrality—is not of God. Any teaching that instructs us to rely upon ourselves rather than to rely wholly and solely upon Christ, is not of God.

Let us stand firm in our Christian freedom, by being on guard against teaching that brings us into bondage. Bad teaching is detrimental and damaging to our relationship with Christ. We must compare all teaching with the Word of God, as did the Bereans mentioned in Acts 17:11, *“Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”*

We must ever bear in mind the centrality of Christ’s cross. The Lord Jesus pointed out to His disciples that His cross and subsequent resurrection were the central theme of the whole Old Testament revelation: *“Then he [Jesus] opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem”* (Lk. 24:45-47.)

Conclusion

“It is for freedom that Christ made us free” (5:1.) Christ redeemed us from the bondage of sin and the condemnation required by the law so that we might live in a state of spiritual freedom as children of God—free to have access and acceptance with God in Christ. Christ did not set us free in order that we might return to that former state of bondage or accept any new form of spiritual bondage.

Let us not be like the Great Houdini and unwittingly allow ourselves to become the unnecessary prisoners of any form of spiritual bondage.

Let us keep our attention focused on the Lord Jesus Christ and His cross, let us keep trusting in Him alone, and then we shall continue in that blessed state of spiritual freedom: free from the bondage of sin and condemnation.