

Get Out of Jail – Free!

Galatians 3:23-29 (ESV) Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

There's plenty of talk about freedom these days. There's a lot of talk about liberty, especially personal liberty. People are more concerned than ever about their individual rights. People are concerned about why a government agency would want to track our phone calls and our email. There is intense debate in society about the conflict between the freedom to marry anyone at all and the God's design for marriage, specifically one man and one woman. People are personally involved in considerations about their safety. They do not want to be the victims of a violent crime or an identity theft.

All these things and many more are hot topics, not only in our nation, but around the world. People do not agree on the answers to significant questions, such as:

Do the individual rights of a woman outweigh the rights of the child she carries?

Is it right to break a law, when the law is bad, or it diminishes basic human rights, given by God or by our constitution?

There's no doubt about it. When it comes to individuals and their rights regarding personal freedom, people get excited. They become involved, not only in the discussion, but even in protests, fasting, picketing and more. Some even give up their own freedom, or their very lives, for their principles.

St. Paul reminds his readers, including us, that freedom is what the Christian life is all about. Two questions have to be answered if we are to continue to enjoy freedom, and if people all around the globe in other cultures are to enjoy freedom. The first is: Freedom FROM what? The second is Freedom FOR what?

First—freedom FROM. Paul says that that believers in Jesus have freedom from the law. The law is a prison – a dark jail or dungeon. Paul knew what prison was like. He had been there, not as a visitor, but as an inmate. He had spent time in the slammer because he would not shut up when ordered to do so. While the law did not prevent Paul from doing what he was sent to do, the law has exactly that effect on us. We want to do something illegal or dishonest, but most often we stop short of doing it because we know that we will get into trouble if we do it. We are reluctantly obedient to most laws because of fear. We fear that we will have to pay the price – for a fine, a penalty, for not following the rules. Living in fear is living in a kind of prison.

We all know well how we break God's law, but we need constant reminders about how to KEEP God's law, how to respond in love to what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. Since we have learned these things from God's Word and from each other, we usually know what is good. And even when we really don't WANT to do something good, we may do it anyway, perhaps out of duty. There are, perhaps, some who didn't really want to come to God's house today to take part in worship, praise, prayer, and thanksgiving. Some may have come out of guilt – because when they don't come they feel guilty. They knew they had the opportunity to do God's will, and they would feel guilty if they were not here.

Obedience which is inspired by the hope of earning God's favor or the favor of another human being is not Christian obedience. When we do things because we have to, and not because we WANT to, we are living in a prison. As long as we are in prison, the future is bleak, because our release is always uncertain. We don't hold the keys. Things can go wrong, and they often do.

But no longer, says Paul. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. Freedom in Christ does not require law enforcement. And a lot of people like the sound of that. No law enforcement means no speeding tickets or parking fines. No penalties for cheating on taxes, driving under the influence, or taking what is not mine. I can shoplift the things I crave, and blow my marriage vows to smithereens. I can abuse my body with drugs and do anything else I care to do. That's what some would call freedom.

That kind of lawlessness is NOT what Paul is talking about. That is not freedom. Living in that kind of freedom isn't freedom at all. We would live in fear of other people, who might exercise their definition of freedom to do evil that we could hardly imagine. Freedom in Christ means something much more.

Freedom in Christ is more than removing physical restraints and limitations. It is literally "getting out of jail" – free! It includes the peace that goes beyond what we can understand as human beings. It's a joy that has no boundaries. It is hope that doesn't disappoint. It was the same promise given to Adam and Eve, passed down through Abraham and David, and finally made a reality in Jesus Christ. It is belonging to a master who won freedom for us by giving up his own life. Real freedom, Paul reminds us, is belonging to Christ.

"You are ALL children of God through faith in Christ Jesus," he writes, "for all of you who were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Freedom and victory over sin, death, and the devil is a gift. You can't buy the get out of jail card. It is a gift. We were baptized into the name of Jesus. We didn't have to do anything for God to be baptized. We didn't have to give God anything in exchange for our baptism. We received all the benefits of baptism as a free gift: we got the forgiveness of sins, new life now, and eternal salvation. Baptism gives birth to faith, and faith results in freedom. Faith in Jesus Christ alone

means no longer living under the curse of sin and the law. Faith in Jesus Christ means freedom!

This freedom in Christ is available to all. And it is free-for-all! It's for everyone. It's for all people in our nation, and for all nations on this globe. Everyone wants to be free, and everyone CAN be free to live under grace, in joy and safety, all under Christ. Belonging to Christ is the key to our freedom. He issues the get out of jail card that has our name on it. He became like us so that we could become like Him. He took the role of a servant so that we would no longer have to be slaves to sin.

As followers of Jesus, we are not just freed from the law. We are freed from serving ourselves. We are freed from self-indulgence. We are freed from self-righteousness. We are freed from envy, prejudice, hatred, lust and greed. We are freed from anything and everything that would threaten to take our eyes off Jesus. How all of this can be true is difficult for those still in prison to understand. That brings us to the second question: Freedom FOR what?

We have been freed for service. We are called to proclaim freedom to the captives. Our freedom in Christ breaks us out of solitary confinement into the fellowship of all believers. As individuals, as families, as congregation, as a church body, we can proclaim the message of freedom in Christ by getting involved in the lives of other, by bearing each others' burden, by joining hearts and hands together. Full-time missionaries are taught that first we serve, and by serving, we earn the right to speak, the privilege of being heard. We have freedom to serve so that we might be privileged to connect people to Jesus.

It is Jesus Christ the Lord who has drawn the line between freedom and slavery. Let us together bless the Lord for doing that – for issuing our personal get out of jail free card, and making us truly free. We have been freed FOR His purposes. We have His promise that as serve and speak, the Spirit will work, and the lives of many will be blessed.

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