

Freed to be Family

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Date: 23 February 2020

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[0 : 00] Tonight I would like us to turn back to Galatians chapter 3 which Alstead very kindly read for us. We are in the midst of a short series called Galatians Freedom and that's a very helpful title because in many ways freedom is one of the main themes of this letter.

And with that in mind our title tonight is Free to Be Family and we'll think about that as we look at the passage we read just as opposed to focus our minds we can just read verses 28 and 29 again where Paul says there is neither dune or Greek, there's neither slave nor free, there's no male and female for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

And if you're Christ's then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. If you've never read Galatians before or if it's a long time since you've maybe looked through it the basic background is this, Paul had founded this church by preaching the gospel of faith in Jesus Christ. His message was that in order to be saved whoever you are, dune or Greek, you need to put your faith in Jesus.

If you do that you will be brought into God's family and that is the gospel message that whoever believes in Jesus will not perish but have eternal life.

[1 : 31] However, after Paul had left these Galatians others came in and they started to say in order to be saved and brought into God's family you actually need to become like a Jew and we often for that reason call them Judaizers.

You've got to keep God's law and in particular you've got to be circumcised. Alastair referred to what Bob was saying this morning, I wasn't here but from just what Alastair was saying it sounds as though he was emphasising the fact that through faith we are justified and that when God looks at us instead of seeing our faults and failings he sees Jesus' righteousness.

The situation in Galatia is a bit like Bob preaching that in the morning saying if you put your trust in Jesus you will be justified and then I come along in the evening and say yes, yes but along with faith you need to do a few other things.

You need to make sure that you come to church every week, twice a week. You need to pay certain amounts of money and you need to make sure that you wear certain clothes or whatever it may be. That's what happened to Paul, others came in with a whole additional set of requirements adding these to the Gospel.

[2 : 59] And when Paul hears about it he goes absolutely ballistic and this letter is pounding home the truth that salvation does not depend on the stuff that you do.

It is only and absolutely only through faith in Jesus Christ. And one of the key truths that Paul wants to emphasise in this letter is that when the Galatians are choosing between what the Judaizers say and what Paul says they're not choosing between two different approaches to Christianity.

They're not choosing between one kind of denomination and another. They are choosing between Christianity and a lie.

It's a choice between a true Gospel and a false Gospel. It's a matter of life and death.

But part of the problem that was maybe leaving the Galatians so perplexed was that the stuff that these false teachers were saying is actually in the Old Testament.

[4 : 14] They weren't making it up out of thin air and they thought that they were taking their teaching from what they read in the Old Testament. And so in order to address this Paul needs to explain how the Old Testament law and the Gospel as it's been manifested clearly in the New Testament, how do these fit together?

And that's what Paul is trying to address in the passage that we read. The result is a wee bit complicated and this is not the most straightforward chapter in the Bible.

But don't worry, we can do it and we're going to go through it together. So we need to just roll up our sleeves as it were and dive in to this great passage. To do so we're going to ask four questions. Number one, what does God want for you? Number two, how does God operate? Number three, what do you have to do? Number four, what difference will it make for you? And I hope that we'll see that these questions will, I hope, clarify the great truths that Paul is setting before us in this passage.

So question number one, what does God want for you? Simple answer to that question is that God wants the very best for you.

[5 : 41] Now that might sound really kind of benign or superficial. I don't mean it in that way at all. What I mean is this, it is a fundamental theological truth that God wants your existence to be the very best that it can be.

God did not create human life to be okay. He created it to be absolutely amazing. And every action of God is grounded on the truth that he wants us to have the best.

And that's why every good and perfect gift we enjoy in the world is from him. Joy and fulfillment and excitement and beauty and achievement and friendship, fun, discovery, all of these things are gifts from God.

And every time God steers us away from something, as we're saying to the kids, every time God says, don't do this, it's because he has our best interest at heart and he's got something better for us.

So when God says, don't lie, don't steal, don't gossip, don't be selfish, don't be aggressive. It's all because he wants our existence to be better than all of these things.

[6 : 53] He wants it to be the best. Now the devil has constantly tried to get humanity to doubt that.

He constantly whispers in our ears, God doesn't really want what's best for you. He did that to Adam and Eve at the very beginning. He's been doing it ever since. And maybe you are on the doorstep of Christianity.

You're thinking about faith in Jesus and you feel like you're just maybe going to take that step or you want to take that step. And you have this doubt in your mind saying, this might spoil my life. That's a lie that the devil has been telling humanity throughout all of our history. And it's a hideous lie because God wants your experience to be the best it can be.

Everything that is bad and cruel and wrong in this world is an unwanted intrusion into God's creation.

[7 : 59] But we have to ask ourselves the question, well, what is the best that human experience can be? What does that top level of existence look like?

Well back in the first century when Paul wrote this letter, there were several levels of human existence and experience. Another way of saying that is that there were just very clear classes of people.

They're summarized under these titles. These are just my own titles, but they reflect the status that was there. There was the powerful. There was very few of these people, that was the smallest group, but they held the huge power in terms of society.

And of course they used that power to protect their position. Beneath them you have the successful, those who maybe didn't rule, but they were very well off, very privileged.

Below them you have the comfortable. Not loaded, but not short, living quite comfortably. Below them the groups start to get bigger and bigger and bigger.

[9 : 07] You have the surviving. It's a much bigger group, people who are working hard to keep going every day. Many of these people would actually have been slaves. In first century society being a slave didn't mean being absolutely kind of chained up and digging holes.

In fields people like teachers and other kind of administrative roles would have been held by slaves. So you have people who are just surviving from day to day.

Below them you have what I've called the crumbling, people who are really struggling to survive. And then beneath them there's the people who are just expendable.

They are so low and so broken that they just didn't really matter. We'd have very, very kind of clear class structure in first century in these days.

Of course we live 2,000 years later. Society has moved on. We don't have this kind of thing nowadays do we? Of course we do.

[10:17] It's exactly the same. It's exactly the same today. So which one of these does God want us to have?

Which one of these is the best that humans can have? The answer is none of them. And that's because what God wants for you is actually far, far better.

What God wants for you is that you would be a child in his family. That is what God wants for you. And if you look at the list below, it's so easy to think, you know, if you were somewhere on that list you'd be thinking, oh, if only I could just get a wee bit higher. So if you were struggling or crumbling you'd say, oh, if I could just be comfortable then everything would be so good.

If you are comfortable you'd think, oh, if I could just be successful it would be so much better. If you were successful you'd be thinking, oh, if I could just be powerful.

[11:18] It's so interesting that you can see that there's yet another billionaire chasing power in the US presidential nomination campaign at the moment.

We keep looking at these things and imagining, oh, if you could just get to that point that would be so good. Now imagine being the child of God.

God's precious child. Welcome in his house. Sitting on his lap held in his arms under his care and being forever showered with his love and affection and delight.

The status of being comfortable, successful or even powerful is nothing compared to being a child of God in his family.

That is the best that humanity can have. And that is exactly what God wants for you. But the question is, well, how do we get that?

[12:23] And that brings us to question two, how does God operate? How does this all work? The question, how does God operate is really what lies at the heart of the issue among these Galatians.

The Judaizers had come along and they were saying fundamentally God operates on the basis of law. Paul is saying no.

It's not the basis of law. Fundamentally God operates on the basis of promise. And it's the choice between these two as the fundamental principle of Christianity that lies at the heart of what Paul is saying.

Paul says, to give you a human example, brothers, even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it's been ratified. Now, the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring.

It doesn't say to his offspring, it's referring to many, but referring to one and to your offspring who is Christ. We're saying that the promise to Abraham runs right through to Jesus.

[13:30] This is what I mean. The law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God so as to make the promise void. For if the inheritance comes by law, it no longer comes by promise.

But God gave it to Abraham by a promise. Remember we said that these Judaizers, they weren't making stuff out of thin air.

They were laying down what they thought was in the Old Testament, what they believed was Old Testament teaching. If you go back to the Old Testament and read it, you'll see that there's a lot of law.

And so you think, well, surely they're right to think that the law is fundamental. Paul says, yes, there is a lot of law, but before that law ever came, there was a promise.

That promise was given to Abraham. And the law which came through Moses 430 years later does not nullify or replace the centrality of God's promise.

[14:37] And the great point that Paul is trying to make is that the fundamental way in which God operates is not in terms of law. It's in terms of promise.

And there's a crucial difference between the two which Paul explains in verses 19 and 20. It's why then the law, it was added because of transgressions until the offspring should come whom the promise had been made.

And it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. Now, an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.

And really it's verse 20 that's laying down the crucial difference between law and promise. He says an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.

What does that mean? What does Paul say? Well, I think to understand this we have to recognize that behind what Paul is arguing is a choice between what you regard as central to God's plan to

make us his family.

[15 : 45] So just think about it. We're talking about what's absolutely central. And as verse 18, which we're going to go in plies, it can either be law or promise.

It's one or the other in terms of what is the central foundational principle of Christianity. And in verse 19, Paul is saying the law is added to the promise.

The promise remains central. The law is an addition, not a replacement. And the reason that's so important is because as we said, there's a crucial difference between how law operates and how promise operates.

Law is put in place through an intermediary. Now what Paul is referring to there is the fact that if you involve an intermediary, it implies that more than one are involved in the agreement.

And the relationship depends on the contribution of each. So you can think of an intermediary trying to negotiate between the British government and the European Union and saying, okay, here's how the deal is going to work.

[16 : 55] You have to do this. You have to do that. You have to play your part. You have to play that part. That's what happened with Moses. He was an intermediary. God was one party giving him the law.

The people were the other party whom Moses was representing. And each side needed to do their part if the whole thing is going to work.

In other words, law is bilateral. Both parties have to play their part and the negotiation is secured by an intermediary.

In response to that, Paul says, an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one. So we could just maybe rephrase that an intermediary implies a bilateral agreement, but God is not like that.

God is one, and the fundamental way in which God operates is not bilateral, it's unilateral. In other words, the fundamental principle of the gospel is not bilateral law, setting and keeping.

[18 : 07] The fundamental principle of the gospel is a unilateral promise from God. Now, I hope that made sense, but just to try and make sure and make it clear, I drew a wee picture which I hope will help.

To summarize, if the law is central, then salvation is by means of a bilateral deal. God does His bit, we do our bit.

And so it's very much a two-way thing. That's how law works. It's set and it needs to be kept. If the promise is central, then salvation is by means of a unilateral gift.

God makes a promise, He does it all. In the first one, we are half and God is half. In the second one, God is one. He does it all.

It's a unilateral promise. Now, in order to just make that a wee bit clearer, I hope, and to illustrate it, I think the difference being set before us here between the law as a central principle and the promise as a central principle.

[19 : 21] The difference is the difference between a staircase and a lift. And I want you to think along these lines, a staircase and a lift.

So a staircase is provided for you, but you have to climb it in order to get to the level you need to. And so, yes, it's provided for you, but its effectiveness depends on your effort, your strength, your perseverance, and your climbing.

It's very much a two-way thing. The stair is provided, but you've got to go up it. A lift is provided for you, and all you have to do is get in, and it will take you to the top floor.

I know you have to press a button, but just forget about the button. Forget about the button. All illustrations have their limitations. Forget about the button. With a lift, you just get in.

You don't have to do anything, and it will take you to the top floor. The law is a staircase. The promise is a lift.

[20 : 33] Now, this illustration, I hope, will help us with our third question, which is what do you have to do? So just to recap, our first question was, what does God want for you?

The answer is he wants the best for you. He wants you in his family. Our second question, how does God operate? Fundamentally, God operates in terms of promise. So what do you have to do? Well, the simple answer to that question is that you need to trust God's promise. That's what Abraham did. Verse 6, we didn't actually read it, but it's there.

You can see it if your Bibles are open or if you've got it on your phone. Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness. And everyone else who believes the same promise shares

in the same blessing.

As verse 9 says, so then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. But the big question is, what's the point in the law?

[21 : 33] And Paul addresses that very question from verse 19 onwards. Now, over the years, Reformed theology, which is the tradition in which our church is part of, has very helpfully said that there are three uses for God's law.

They're summarized under different titles. The three I'm going to use are these. The political use of God's law, whereby it provides a stable moral framework for society to function.

There's the pedagogical use of the law in the sense that the law is a schoolmaster. In other words, it takes us to school, it helps us to learn.

And the third use is that the law is a rule of life. It shows us how to live as Christians. It's number two that Paul is focusing on here in Galatians chapter 3, the pedagogical use of the law.

And in fact, that phrase, pedagogical use of the law, comes from the chapter that we read because in verse 24, Paul says the law is our guardian.

[22 : 39] And that word guardian is actually the word pedagogue. And that was the slave who took, who was responsible for taking children to school.

All of that means is that the law helps us to learn. And that's what we have to think about for the moment just now. So if we think of the law as a staircase, it'll tell us three things.

Sorry, I'll just stay there just now. If we think of the, have the image of a staircase in your mind, we learn three key things from that.

First is that theoretically the law could take you where you need to go. Paul emphasizes that when he says, is the law contrary to the promise of God?

Certainly not. For if a law that had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. So what Paul is basically saying is that theoretically, if you could keep God's law, if you could do everything perfectly, if you could get to the top of that stair, then you would be righteous.

[23 : 45] The problem of sin wouldn't be there. A perfect lawkeeper is not a sinner. The staircase theoretically leads to the top floor. The law does not contradict the promise.

They both lead to the same place. The second thing that the law teaches us is that while theoretically righteousness is attainable through lawkeeping, in reality, it's absolutely impossible because we are all sinners.

Moving on to verse 22 to 23, Paul says that 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 of sin, faith would be revealed. The principle behind this is the fact that the law doesn't offer middle ground. It either frees you or it imprisons you. And that makes perfect sense. You think of being a driver.

I can either legally drive by adhering to the law, or that very same law will remove my liberty to drive if I break it. You always have to come down on one side of the law.

[24 : 57] You're either a lawkeeper or a lawbreaker. And in terms of God's law, it's scripture that makes that judgment. It's scripture that reveals the standard against which we are all measured.

And the standard of expectation in the Bible is perfection. And that's because God wants what is best for us.

But the result is that no one can reach that standard and everything, including every single person is imprisoned under sin. If you can stand up and say, I have never, ever, ever done anything wrong, I am a perfect human being, then none of what Paul is saying applies to you.

But can you say that? So to go back to your staircase diagram, the standard that God requires is perfect.

And that means that no one, absolutely no one can climb that stair. If every single step requires perfect obedience, then none of us can make us to the top.

[26 : 12] And the reality is that our sinfulness is forcing us back down the stairs all the time. And we can't escape from that. We are held captive under the law.

So the law is teaching us that in our efforts to climb the staircase to God, we have no chance.

Every time we sin, we are falling back down the stairs. So we think we can go up and then we sin and we stumble. And that's why if you make law the central principle of your religion, which is what these Judaizers were doing, then you're on a pathway to despair because the law will always

eventually leave you in a heap at the bottom of the stair.

And it's immensely important to recognize this because you might think, well, this is all just kind of like weird obscure stuff way back in Galatia in the first century. But the truth is this staircase approach to religion is the default way in which humanity approaches things.

And I think that's part of what Paul means when he talks about elementary principles in verses three and nine of chapter four. The basic elementary approach to religion across the world is be a good person and you'll be saved.

[27 : 37] Meet the standard and you'll be accepted. There's so many of the world's religions and even the worldview of secular society says if you do this and if you do that, then you will be at an acceptable level.

If you fail to conform, then you are unacceptable. And we think that sounds so harsh, but it's exactly how the world works. Even the non-religious secular world does this.

Think for example, what happens to a politician if they make a mistake? Some other stair. Oh, wow. Well timed. There we go. I didn't ask them to do that.

The key point that Paul is making is that that kind of religion is slavery. And that makes perfect sense. How does slavery work?

[28 : 38] Well, if someone's your slave, you tell them you've got to do something and they have to do it. How does staircase religion work? You tell someone to do something and they have to do it.

And if your standards are low, then maybe you can get up a few steps. But if your standards are at God's level, then you will never, ever climb the stair.

So what on earth do we do? Well we have to remember that the fundamental principle in Christianity is not the staircase.

It's not the law. The law, the staircase, is an addition. And the addition of the staircase serves the purpose of leaving us in a heap at the bottom.

Now you might think, well that's depressing. But the key point is that if the staircase is an addition, it means that there's something missing from our diagram.

[29 : 49] And we have to bring both of our diagrams together. The reason the staircase leaves us at a heap in the bottom is not because God doesn't want you or because he gets a kick out of humiliating you and crushing you.

The reason the staircase leaves us in a heap at the bottom is because at the bottom of the stair, you will find the entrance to the lift.

And that's why the law is not pushing us down the stair in order to leave us in despair. The law is pushing us down the stair because there we find the promise that will take us to the level that the staircase never could.

The law does not replace the promise. The law pushes us towards the promise. And it's that promise that takes us up to the level that God wants us to be at.

Without the law, the promise is horrible. But without the promise, the law is horrible. But with the promise, the law is brilliant.

[30 : 57] Just like a schoolmaster, it's taking you where you need to go. And if you get into that lift, if you trust in God's promise, it will take you to the very top.

It will take you into God's family. But there's one thing we have to add to our diagram because the lift shaft is not the right shape.

It should be this shape. Because the law will push you to the foot of the cross and the cross will lift you into the family of God.

And what do you have to do? Nothing. What do you have to do to go up in a lift?

Nothing. You just have to get in and trust that it will take you where you need to go.

[32 : 03] What do you have to do to be given a promise? Nothing. You just have to trust the promise giver.

That's why Paul says, the law was our guardian until Christ came in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we're no longer under a guardian for in Christ Jesus, you're all sons of God through faith.

The response to a promise is simply to trust. Now I've been a Christian for about 25 odd years, but I am still flabbergasted by that.

Why would God do that? Why would He provide everything for us as a gift? Why would He promise us so much? Why would He do absolutely everything that needs to be done?

Why does God do it all? God's answer? Because I love you and I want the best for you.

[33 : 19] But these Galatians were saying, we want to go back to the staircase and Paul says, are you crazy?

Who has bewitched you? And we have to ask ourselves the same question. Are we wanting to stick to staircase religion, that elementary principle of the world where we have to kind of earn our favor with God like we have to earn our favor with other people?

If that's your religion, then your religion is not Christianity. But if you are trusting God's promise, then there are some amazing implications.

That's our fourth question. What difference will all of this make for you? I'm going to say three things and I'm going to try and do one minute on each one.

First one is you have family security. All of this means that if you are a Christian, you are absolutely secure as God's child.

[34 : 20] You are standing up there in God's family on the basis of the unilateral, irrevocable promise of God. Your status as God's child is grounded solely and utterly on His promise.

So when Paul says the law cannot annul God's promise, it cannot make His promise void. That means that God's promise to make you His child is unannulable.

That means that God is going to keep it forever. And all of that means that if you are a Christian, you cannot fall down the stairs again. The law cannot push you down the stairs.

Your own frailty cannot send you tumbling. You're completely free of the risk of falling. And the amazing thing about being on that top floor in God's family is that you never have to worry about the staircase again.

You are totally free all because of God's promise. And ultimately, that's what makes your security so certain.

[35 : 19] It is His promise, not your promise. It's His promise. And if it's His, you can't undo it. There's a very important sense in which your security as a Christian has got absolutely nothing to do with you.

And yet we look for security in ourselves. I've done this, I've done that, I've experienced this, therefore God will like me. That is complete rubbish. Your security in God is His business.

It is His promise. When God promises to save you through faith in Jesus Christ, He's saying, this is my promise. And keeping it is my business.

Your security is grounded on the unilateral promise of God. And it does not matter how weak you feel you are, or how much of a failure you are, or how rubbish you think you are.

To go back to the illustration, if you go up a staircase and you are weak and tired and you stumble, you fall back down. If you get into a lift and you're exhausted and weak and a failure and you collapse, what happens to you?

[36 : 26] You just carry on going up. And that's exactly what it's like for you as a Christian. It's God who's holding you.

It's God that your security is grounded in. We have an amazing family security in Him. Second thing is family unity. If the Gospel brings us to the top floor, we're not the only person there.

There are many, many, many other people there. And one of the crucial implications is that all of us there on that level are united in that family. And what Paul goes on to say, there's neither Greek nor Jews, slave nor free, male or female, you're all one in Christ Jesus.

No matter where you are on that hierarchy of social class we looked at earlier, in Jesus we are all united and we are all equal. That was one of the amazing things about the early church.

You had men, women, Jews, Gentiles, slaves, free, powerful, beggars, aristocrats, expendables, all together.

[37 : 27] Everyone is equal. And that of course is why division is such a horrendous denial of the Gospel. We said at the start that when Paul saw the false teaching coming into the Galatian church, he went ballistic.

So Galatians is the ballistic letter if you like. But there's one more ballistic letter in the New Testament. Do you know what it is? It's first Corinthians.

And it's all because of division. And Paul is horrified at the false teaching that the Galatians face. He's horrified at the division in the current thing in church.

Just as a side note, it's always a very penetrating question to ask, what makes you go ballistic?

Does division in the church make you go ballistic?

Does false teaching in regard to the Gospel make you go ballistic? Or does someone take in your packing space make you go ballistic?

[38 : 35] Our unity is a family unity. And that's why we want everyone who steps into this church to come away saying they're like a big family because that's exactly what we are.

And the basis of that family is a father who loves all of his children. Our security and our unity is grounded in his love.

The last thing I want to say is that all of this gives us family security, family unity and family privilege.

What word does Paul use to describe the Christians in verse 29? It's the word air. That means that we're in the extraordinary position whereby we have an inheritance from God.

Now what is an inheritance? Well an inheritance is simply the promise that the best a father has is going to go to their children. So if I write my will, I'm not going to leave my children my rubbish or my debt or my broken old computer or just the stuff that needs to be thrown out.

[39 : 39] I'm going to leave them my best. That's what an inheritance is. And God is exactly the same. He promises us an inheritance. That inheritance means that we will share in the best that he can give us, which brings us back to the very first question we asked.

What does God want for you? He wants to give you his best. And in Jesus we are free to enjoy all the incredible blessings of being in his family.

The key question is how do we respond? Well if you are a Christian I hope all of that, I hope all of it makes sense and I hope all of it makes you want to say thank you Father.

And I hope it motivates you to live the kind of life that your Father wants you to live. But if you're not yet a Christian or not sure, I want you to think about whether you want to keep on climbing the stair or whether you want to get in the lift.

One thing is certain. Jesus is holding the door open for you right now. But all you need to do is pray that he would take you into his family and he has promised that he will.

[41 : 08] Let's pray. Father, we thank you so much that you are the God who makes and keeps your promise.

We thank you so much that we don't have to work our way up to you or earn our salvation like climbing a staircase. We thank you that we just come to you and we get in that lift that is your promise in complete dependence on you and relying on everything that you've done for us in Jesus. We thank you so much just for your promise to make us your children. We pray that we would all just see how simple and how amazing your promise is.

We pray, Lord, that you would bind us closer together in unity as a family, that we would love you more and that we would love one another more.

We thank you so much that in Jesus there's neither dune or Greek, slave or free, male nor female, but we are all one in him.

[42 : 20] We thank you for that so much. Amen.