



STAY STRONG
LIVE FREE



**7 STUDIES FROM GALATIANS
MITCHELTON PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

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Stay Strong, Live Free

Freedom. It's more than just a furniture store. As creatures who get ourselves trapped in all kinds of ways, it's one of our deepest longings. For the people of Israel in Exodus, it was a longing for freedom from slavery in Egypt. For others in the ancient world, it was from a cruel slavery to idol worship or tyrannical rule. For you and me, perhaps it's freedom from self destructive habits, or childhood memories, or greeds and lusts that we just can't escape. And so we long for... freedom. The long highway ahead with the caravan behind, the tropical island paradise; the final mortgage statement with that zero balance; the final exam; graduation ... they're all small signs of a bigger dream of freedom that often drives us.

As Paul writes his famous letter to the Galatians, he's got lots to say about freedom. Because they're in danger of swapping one kind of slavery for another. The details might surprise you. And given their ancient context, they might confuse you a bit too - it's a very different world. But human longings haven't changed, and the solution Paul is offering hasn't changed either. "It's for freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm then, and don't be burdened again by slavery."

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Setting

In a radical move for his time, Paul planted a non-Jewish Christian church in Galatia, in the centre of Turkey. Now he's moved on to church-plant elsewhere and he's heard some disturbing news. Jewish-Christian teachers have come to Galatia (1:6) telling his fresh new Christians that to really belong to God's people, non-Jewish ('Gentile') Christians must keep God's Old Testament law (4:21), especially by taking on circumcision (5:2) as the sign of Israel's covenant with God (Gen 17:11), a reminder to Israelite men to keep all of God's law (5:3 cf. Gen 17:1-2).

Paul is furious. To him, this is just a way to avoid conflict with Jews. The new teachers want to escape persecution from those who don't like Gentile inclusion (6:12 cf. 4:29). They're claiming Paul was wrong in not getting the Galatians circumcised in the first place; they claim that Paul has now been corrected by James and Peter (5:11), and he's admitting his mistake. Wrong! James and Peter originally supported Paul's no-law-for-Gentiles gospel (2:6-9) - but now they've caved in to Jewish pressure (2:12). Paul is the one who is staying true to the gospel of grace.

So what's at stake for us? These days there's nobody telling us we've got to be more Jewish, although there's regular criticism from the atheist community for our inconsistency in not keeping Old Testament Jewish food laws though we're anti gay-marriage. How do we answer challenges like that?

Paul talks a lot about maintaining our 'freedom' as Christians. For Jewish Christians it was freedom from Old Testament laws. For Gentile Christians it's freedom from their old idolatry; freedom to simply trust Jesus and walk by the Spirit that reshapes our hearts. What does that "Christian freedom" actually look like when we live it out day to day in our world?

For Paul, taking on circumcision and 'Jewishness' was a sure-fire way for these Gentiles Christians to forfeit their salvation in Jesus (5:2-4). What started as a simple way to escape Jewish persecution is for Paul both an anti-Jesus and anti-Spirit way to lose their eternal salvation - giving up the supreme freedom of simply trusting Jesus, with nothing else added.

WEEK 1 || GALATIANS 1:1-10

FREEDOM!

It's 500 years since Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to a church door in Wittenberg, sparking the Protestant Reformation. Today, Protestant Christians (like Presbyterians) still enjoy the freedoms Luther helped rediscover. Freedom to simply trust in Jesus; freedom from rituals as a way to salvation and from the harsh rule of church authorities. Paul's ancient letter to the Christians in Galatia was one part of the Bible that revealed those freedoms to Luther. As we'll see, it's a letter all about freedom, and staying strong in the face of anything that threatens to take that freedom away..

To get started thinking about "freedom", on a scale from 0 to 10 rate your own level of "enslavement" to these 10 things:

Your work/study	___	Your finances	___
Your kids/parents	___	Acceptance at church	___
Your diet/exercise	___	Acceptance by society	___
Always presenting well	___	Entertainment	___
Your house/garden/car	___	Your smartphone	___

Discuss: What kind of freedom are you most searching for?



PRESSURE IN GALATIA

Paul's writing this letter because the Galatians' freedom is under threat. In this study we'll try to figure out exactly what was going on in Galatia... and why Paul writes so passionately about it!

1. Break up into pairs; each pair can each read and discuss one of these four questions that overview the whole letter:

Galatians 1:1-10 What's Paul's attitude to gospel compromise and why?

Galatians 2:11-16 Something similar happened back in Antioch. What does that suggest about what's happening now in Galatia?

Galatians 5:1-11 What's at stake in accepting the Jewish ritual of circumcision*, and why?

Galatians 6:11-16 What's really behind the push to get circumcised*?

**remember, circumcision was the physical sign of becoming Jewish.*

2. Report back to the group, showing where you found your answers in the text. What common ideas can you find between the various parts of the letter you read? As a group, try to piece it all together.
3. What are the new teachers in Galatia pushing? What's motivating them?
4. What's Paul advocating? What's motivating him?

FREEDOM TODAY

Paul says it over and over throughout the letter: he doesn't want the Galatians to lose their freedom and be swamped by Jewish laws. For us, it's not all that tempting to take on ancient rules when you're downing a prawn standing next to the Weber or eating a bacon and egg roll. But the pressure from 'Jewish Taliban' in Galatia meant it was genuinely tempting for them to conform to avoid trouble! To see how Paul's letter

is still crucial for us, we need to understand why taking on the Jewish law was a threat to their freedom. Then we can identify the different but similar ways our own freedom is threatened today...

Paul (a Jew himself) highlights three problems with taking on the Jewish law:

- **People pleasing:** It's mostly to escape persecution, so it's prioritising acceptance by people over acceptance by God.

- **Gospel compromise:** It's a rejection of the truth that God's acceptance is gained by nothing but trusting in Jesus.

- **Burden building:** It adds a burden you have to keep carrying while giving you no power to lift it.

5. How do people pleasing, gospel compromise and burden building rob you of freedom? Put positively, how is it liberating if you can resist each of these problems?

6. For each of the following statements, discuss which of the three freedom-robbing problems it brings, people pleasing, gospel compromise or burden building (it may be two of them):

- "Real success is about proving yourself in every area of life."
- "It's narrow minded to say Jesus is the only way to be saved."
- "Real Christians live abundant, prosperous, successful lives."

7. Think back to your highest "enslavement" ratings in the first question. Which of these have an element of people pleasing, gospel compromise, or burden building? Where do you personally feel pressure to please people, compromise the gospel, or take on burdens?

8. Paul says you're completely acceptable to the creator of the universe if you simply trust in Jesus. If you could believe that and remember that, how would it free you?

• **Galatians 1:10**

Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

• **Galatians 1:6**

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all.

• **Galatians 5:1**

Do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

Pray together, that as followers of Jesus we might really understand the 'grace and peace' that come from trusting Jesus.