

An aerial night view of a city street, likely in Las Vegas, showing cars, buildings, and streetlights. The image is used as a background for the text.

WEEK 5 | ***GALATIANS 4:8-5:12***

FREE FROM SLAVERY

If you've followed Paul's argument so far, you might have picked up the hint that you're not meant to put yourself under the Old Testament law. But that's not the only thing Jesus sets people free from. There are lots of other things in this world that can enslave us. Things we devote our lives to, slaving to meet their demands, even though they're never going to give us true blessing; principles which drive us, even when we're unaware.

Before you start...

The Greek word translated "forces" in 4:9 is the same word translated "elemental spiritual forces" back in 4:3, where Paul was talking about the law. The NIV footnotes translate the word '*stoichea*' in both places as "basic principles." It's an important word that Paul uses again in a surprising way in chapter 5. It's the word Aristotle used as he tried to discover the 'underlying principles' of the physical world; the word used for a group of soldiers marching in a straight line. What are the 'underlying principles' that govern our lives and behaviour? For Jews, it was a bunch of rules and holy days set down by the law. For idol worshippers like the Galatians used to be (when they were 'slaves to those who are not gods' in 4:8) there were other 'basic principles'. But in the end, basic principles like that don't help!

PRESSURE IN GALATIA

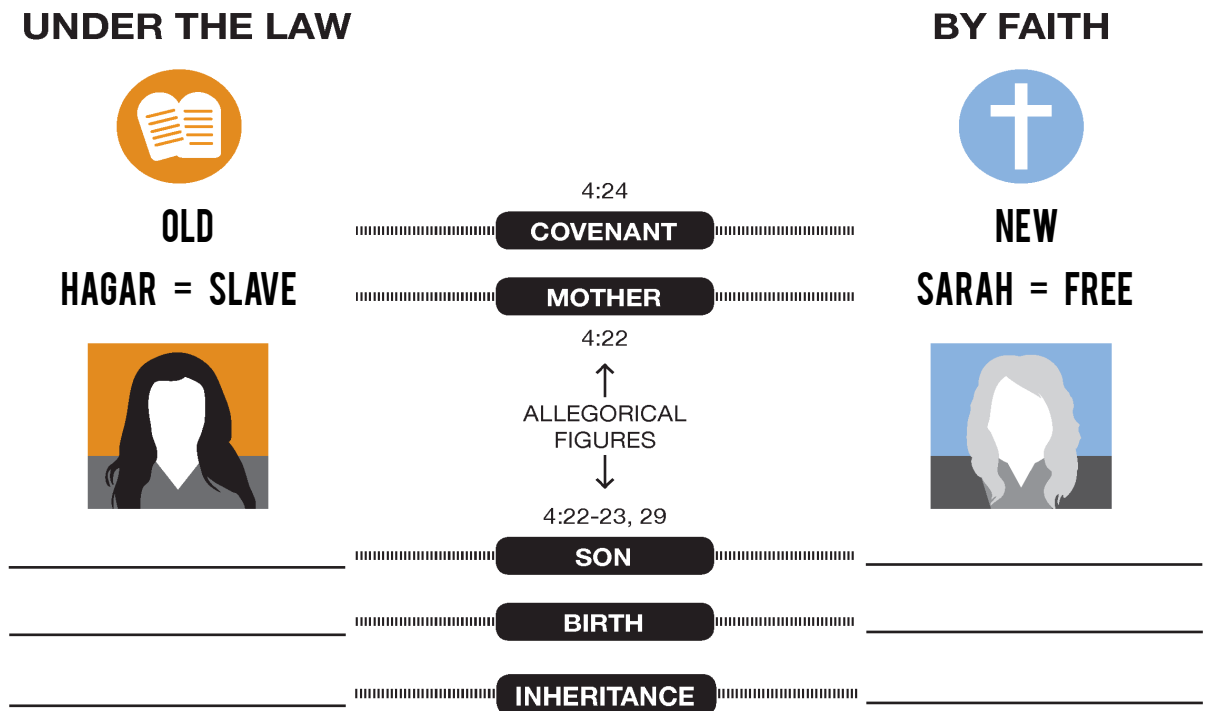
Read Galatians 4:8-11

1. What's Paul's conclusion about both these kinds of 'basic principle' in verse 9?
2. Sneaking ahead to 5:25, Paul's phrase "keep in step with" comes from exactly the same word - 'stoichea' - that was used for soldiers keeping in ranks or alignment. Where is our 'alignment' to come from?

Read Galatians 4:21-31

Paul goes on in chapter 4 to draw a contrast between a life of slavery and a life of freedom. He's using an 'allegory' - a word-picture drawing broad correspondences between a core old testament story and his own situation. It's simple enough if we focus on the general contrast between a life of slavery and a life of freedom... though for his Jewish readers, his conclusions are shocking!

3. Using what Paul says here, contrast a life of slavery and a life of freedom by filling out the diagram below:



Why would Paul's conclusion confuse and offend the Jerusalem Jews who are so critical of Paul? (How does he use it to explain their opposition?)

Paul goes on to make the contrast even sharper... **Read Galatians 5:1-6**

4. How do Paul's opponents want the new Galatian Christians to be 'brought into alignment' (ie justified) before God? What's Paul's alternative?

This is an astonishing suggestion from Paul - and a crucial point to grasp - that the Old Testament Law, given by God has no power to free enslaved sinners. No wonder they're angry at him!

5. Think through what Paul is saying here: How would adopting the law be like going back to idol worship?

FREEDOM TODAY

For the Galatians, adding 'Jewishness' alongside Jesus was a disaster. It could equally be an idol statue, or taking on Jewish sabbaths and holy days, or allowing themselves to be circumcised 'just to fit in'. There are all kinds of 'basic principles' at work that seem so right - and yet lead us away from grace! "For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope."

Our idols or underlying principles can be hard to identify. New York pastor Tim Keller wrote a whole book about how this works. Check out the sidebar for a snippet.

6. What are you most tempted to devote your life to alongside or above Jesus? Is it your career? A relationship? Your family? Your lifestyle? Something else?

What 'basic principles' drive these things - the hidden assumptions that everyone agrees with?

7. How realistic is it to think this other thing will really give you what you hope for from it?

What will serving it above all else likely do to your life instead?

8. Paul says above all else you should trust in Jesus, and do everything else only as an expression of that trust in Jesus (5:6). Do you think this really is the path to true freedom? Why?

"Anything in life can serve as an idol, a God-alternative, a counterfeit god. I recently heard the account of a field army officer who so exorbitantly pursued physical and military discipline with his troops that he broke their morale. That led to a communication breakdown during combat that resulted in fatalities. I knew a woman who had experienced periods of poverty as she grew up. As an adult she was so eager for financial security that she passed over many good prospective relationships in order to marry a wealthy man she did not really love. This led to an early divorce and to all the economic struggles she feared so much. It appears that some major league baseball players, in a quest to play not just well but at a Hall of Fame level, took steroids and other drugs. As a result, their bodies are more broken and their reputations more sullied than if they had been willing to be good rather than great. The very things upon which these people were building all their happiness turned to dust in their hands because they had built all their happiness upon them. In each case, a good thing among many was turned into a supreme thing, so that its demands overrode all competing values. **But counterfeit gods always disappoint, and often destructively so.**

We know a good thing has become a counterfeit god when its demands on you exceed proper boundaries. Making an idol out of work may mean that you work until you ruin your health, or you break the laws in order to get ahead. Making an idol out of love may mean allowing the lover to exploit and abuse you, or it may cause terrible blindness to the pathologies in the relationship. An idolatrous attachment can lead you to break any promise, rationalize any indiscretion, or betray any other allegiance, in order to hold onto it. It may drive you to violate all good and proper boundaries. **To practice idolatry is to be a slave."**

Tim Keller, Counterfeit Gods