

Chapter Five

Commentary

1 It was for freedom that Messiah set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.

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The passion of Paul comes through in this verse which functions both as a conclusion of his previous polemic as well as the bridge to the next section of the epistle. The bold, opening statement that Messiah has set us free stands as the primary reason why the Gentile believers in Galatia should not yield to the pressure of the Influencers. Far more is at stake than they may realize. For if they were to yield by agreeing that only proselytes had a firm standing in the covenant, they would, at the same time, be undermining or even dismissing the crucial place of Messiah in terms of covenant membership. It may well have been that Paul senses the finality of his plea: if they reject what he has said at this point, there may be no way to convince them otherwise in the future. The Apostle has come to the keystone in the arch of his argument.

“Freedom” is a general theme throughout the epistle, even if it is not directly mentioned throughout (the term is only found here and in v. 13, and in 2:4 translated “liberty”). The Greek noun is ἐλευθερία, *eleutheria*, with the verb being ἐλευθερώω, *eleutheroō*. Paul uses the noun “freedom/liberty” in Rom. 8:21; 1Cor. 10:29; 2Cor. 3:17, and the verb only here. The word itself speaks of “set free from restraint,” or “liberty” as opposed to “slavery.” The Lxx uses the verb at Prov 25:10 (in an expanded translation of the MT): “Favor and friendship set a man free,” which is in the context of quarreling and disputes. Elsewhere, the Lxx uses the verb in 2Macc 1:27 and 2:22 in the context of Israel’s freedom from the slavery of the nations. The noun is found in the Lxx at Lev 19:20, of a slave woman who has not been set free, and in the apocryphal literature at 1Mac. 14:26; 1Esdr. 4:49,53; 3Mac. 3:28. In these latter references, once again the word denotes “freedom” as opposed to slavery in terms of the people of Israel and their oppression from foreign powers.

As we might expect, the history of interpretation within the Christian commentators has taken Paul to be speaking of “freedom from the law”. His words are construed as saying that Messiah has forever liberated His people from the slavery of Torah, and thus the Gentile believers are foolish to consider going back under its tyrannical rule. But such an interpretation cannot be reconciled with Paul’s statements elsewhere regarding the Torah, nor does it fit the overall message of Galatians. For instance, in Romans 3:31 Paul writes, “Do we then nullify the Torah through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Torah.” One is at a loss to understand how he could make such a statement there, but be teaching the Galatians here that Messiah has liberated them from the “yoke of slavery” defined as the Torah. The words of Betz are a fitting example of this kind of interpretation:

For the Apostle there is no longer any Law, and therefore there are no transgressions: Christ is “the end of the Law.”¹

Such a misinterpretation of Paul at this point flows from a perception of the Gospel as something antithetical or contrary to Torah, and from a view of

1 Betz, *Galatians*, p. 257.

Torah that it is a list of rules (“law,” νόμος, *nomos*) which cannot be obeyed and thus is a millstone around one’s neck. But neither Paul nor the Judaisms of his day ever viewed the Torah this way, though some did consider the additional laws of the Sages to be a burden (Matt 23:4; Acts 15:10).

Yet the real issue is what Paul understands as the “freedom” won for believers by Yeshua. From what, exactly, did He free us? And what is the liberty, therefore, that we enjoy as the result of His sacrificial death on our behalf? The obvious answer is that Yeshua redeemed us from the slavery of sin, and the wrath of God Who, on the basis of the Torah, condemns those who bear their iniquities. Once again, Paul is making a clear demarcation between the Gospel and the freedom it offers, and the “message of good” (“another gospel”) that the Influencers were teaching. For Paul, the decisive moment in the lives of the Galatians comes in their willingness to confess their faith in Yeshua as over against succumbing to the teaching of covenant membership based upon the “flesh,” that is, the idea that covenant membership could be obtained by acquiring “legal Jewish status.” As he has consistently taught in this epistle, those who rely upon their Jewish status will be sorely disappointed when they stand in the day of judgment, for they are trusting in something that is unable to render them genuine members of God’s gracious promise. The issue at hand for Paul is not the ongoing relevance of the Torah in terms of the life of those who have been declared righteous, but on what constitutes the means by which a person becomes a covenant member in the first place.

This is what Paul introduced in 2:4 with the concept of “freedom.” “Our freedom in Messiah” is our having been liberated from the condemnation of sin and brought into a place of righteousness before the Almighty. Those who opposed the message of the Gospel were teaching a different way of covenant membership—a different “gospel.” Here, then, is the issue: will the Galatian believers stand firm in their acceptance of the Gospel or not? Will they evidence a genuine faith (something Paul is convinced they had) or will they abandon their faith in favor of seeking covenant membership on the basis of the “flesh?” Thus, “slavery” is a bondage to sin—the status of still being under the penalty of one’s transgressions, while “freedom” is the position of having been declared righteous by the Father on the basis of the Messiah’s atoning sacrifice. For Paul, the choice presented to the Galatians was not one of “faith with the Torah” versus “faith without the Torah,” but between salvation and condemnation, between genuine faith and no faith.

Such an interpretation of “freedom” in our text is consistent with Paul’s use of the term elsewhere:

that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Rom 8:21)

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. (2Cor 3:17)

The freedom spoken of in Romans 8:21 is the final and complete redemption in the eschaton, a freedom from the corruption of the fallen world, including the sin nature. In 2Cor 3, the bondage under which Paul’s countrymen labor is that the Messiah is veiled in the very Torah they read every Shabbat. But when this veil is taken away by the Spirit of God, the Messiah is seen for who He truly is, and He becomes therefore the object of

genuine faith, which in turn brings liberty—liberty from the “ministry of condemnation.”

Paul does use the word “freedom” in 1Cor 10:29 in dealing with the issues of *halachah*. Here, however, the context makes it clear that he is talking about *halachah* not specifically detailed in the Scriptures themselves, but what can only be construed as individual preference. In the matter of eating meat purchased at the common market, of which some might consider it *halachically* unfit, one is to prefer the conscience of the other, though this does not mean that one’s “freedom” is taken away by the personal decision of another person. In the context Paul is stressing that various decisions on *halachic* issues must hold the unity of the body as a primary consideration, as well as the need for each to edify the other, that is, not to wound the conscience of another member of the community.

In all of these instances, Paul’s understanding of freedom is not a lack of restraint, as though boundaries have been abolished and one is free to do whatever one wants. Nor is his understanding of freedom that the boundaries have become entirely “personal,” so that each one lives according to what each one decides is right for himself. Paul makes it clear in Rom 6-7 that freedom in Messiah is nothing more or less than becoming His bond slave, so that the each believer is a “slave of righteousness.” For Paul, freedom in Messiah is the contented reality that one has been accepted in the Beloved One as righteous, and that he therefore need never fear condemnation (Rom 8:1). This freedom, however, naturally results in a willing submission to the rule of the Spirit and therefore the ways of God. As Paul teaches in Roman 6, the reason that this “liberty” does not produce an Epicurean perspective on ethics is because in the salvation of the soul, the soul has been changed. The “old man” has been crucified, and in its place has been resurrected a “new man” who exists “in Messiah.” Freedom in this regard, then, is having been freed from the bondage of the fallen nature, and given a new heart to follow God.

This concept of the “new man” is parallel to the prophetic promise of a “new heart” given to Israel:

And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God. (Ezek 11:19–20)

As in the prophetic vision of Ezekiel which pictures the regathering and salvation of national Israel, so Paul recognized that the salvation of the individual within the remnant is a foretaste of that final victory—a kind of “first fruits” of the final harvest. In the same manner in which the nation will be given a new heart in the place of her heart of stone, so that individual believer is freed from the “old man” and given a new heart. But in both cases, the result of the Spirit’s activity is that those He regenerates walk in righteousness. Paul’s use of the term “slaves of righteousness” is actually another way of expressing what he means by “freedom.” Walking in God’s ways of righteousness is freedom indeed!

It was this freedom that the Galatians were considering abandoning. For if they were to believe the lie that covenant status (and thus a position of righteousness before God) could be achieved through becoming proselytes, they would have denied the Gospel and Yeshua. This in turn would mark them out as in bondage rather than as free. Only in Messiah, and in Messiah alone, is

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freedom to be achieved.

therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Like a military commander rallying his wavering troops, Paul gives forth the command to “keep standing firm.” In the face of battle, when it may appear as though defeat is imminent, “standing firm” is the necessary command. The Galatian believers had doubtlessly been overwhelmed by the message of the Influencers, with its appeal to long-standing tradition and its voice of authority to give it substance. But Paul requires them to stand firm in the truth of the Gospel he had delivered, a Gospel based upon the very words of Messiah: “I am the way, the truth, and the life ...” (John 14:6).

He implores them: “do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.” He has well demonstrated the idea of slavery in chapter 4, with the Hagar/Sarah midrash. The “yoke of slavery” no doubt refers to the prevailing rabbinic theology that accorded covenant status to “all of Israel,” meaning, those who could claim Jewish lineage and those who had been declared Jewish as proselytes.² But such a doctrine could never bring genuine freedom, because such a teaching was not the true Gospel. The man-made ritual of proselytism was never accompanied by the giving of the Spirit, and did nothing to change the heart. A status based upon the “flesh” could never bring about a life of righteousness as was the case with those who had been genuinely born from above. Like the superstitious beliefs of their pagan past, when they believed that the “elemental things of the world” were their masters, so to believe that the declaration of becoming a Jew could actually accord them righteous standing before God was nothing less than a return to slavery. The freedom they had gained through simple faith in the Messiah was freedom indeed. They needed nothing more.

Paul’s use of the term “yoke” (ζυγός, *zugos*) may have been strategic in the ears of the Galatians including the Influencers. The term is a favorite one of the Sages, being used in a positive way of taking upon oneself the “yoke of the commandments.”

R. Nehunya b. Haqqaneh says, “From whoever accepts upon himself the yoke of Torah do they remove the yoke of the state and the yoke of hard labor. “And upon whoever removes from himself the yoke of the Torah do they lay the yoke of the state and the yoke of hard labor.” (m.*Avot* 3:5)

It may well be that the Influencers were using this terminology to persuade the Galatians to take upon themselves the “yoke of the commandments” (by which they meant submission to the Oral Torah as well). Paul’s use of the term coupled with “yoke of slavery” is therefore in stark contrast to the Influencers’ message. Exchanging the clear message of the Scriptures for the message of the Influencers would not render the Galatian Gentiles free, but would place them under the yoke of man made laws which were, in this case, contrary to the very message of God Himself.

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2 Note the use of Is 60:21, “all you people are righteous” in m.*Sanhedrin* 10.1 as the basis for the rabbinic dictum: “All Israel have a place in the world to come.”

2 Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Messiah will be of no benefit to you.

The passion continues to ring forth: Paul asks for their undivided attention in regard to what he is saying here. His appeal is very personal (and thus the inclusion of his name). The very one who came and first gave them the Gospel is the one who once again appeals for their hearing.

“To receive circumcision” (περιτέμνω, *peritemno*, which could be active or middle in this case, and could be rendered “get yourselves circumcised”) means to submit to the ritual of a proselyte. It did not mean merely to undergo circumcision (the cutting of the foreskin), but to accept the ritual of a proselyte as the necessary step for becoming a *bona fide* covenant member. The cross-roads had been reached: covenant membership by faith in the Messiah for Jew and Gentile, or covenant membership as envisioned by the Influencers, based upon the status of being Jewish—which one would they accept? If they did accept proselytism as the means of genuine covenant membership, then this would mean that they had forsaken the Gospel delivered by Paul, and it would also mean that they had forsaken Yeshua as the only means of salvation.

Here it is made plain to us: the Gentile believers to whom Paul writes have not yet been circumcised. They were still at the point of decision. But what for them may have been a kind of “both-and” decision (confess Yeshua and accept the Influencers’ message as well) Paul has turned into an “either-or” matter. If they trust in their status as proselytes, they would, at the same time, diminish the central place of Messiah. To disregard His complete and final work is to render Him as without value (ὠφέλεω, *ōphelēō*).

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3 And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Torah.

Here the language is changed just a bit from the previous sentence: “every man (παντὶ ἀνθρώπῳ, *panti anthrōpō*) who receives circumcision . . .” Casting the sentence in this way makes his words applicable to the individual. “Each one of you . . .” means that all who would submit to the ritual of a proselyte would be under obligation to “keep the whole Torah.” Interestingly, Paul uses the Greek ἄνθρωπος, *anthrōpos*, which generally means “people” rather than strictly “male” (for which we would expect ἀνὴρ, *aner*, though *anthrōpos* can mean “male” at times). It might sound strange to our ears to hear him say “anyone who gets circumcised” and include in this females, but the possibility exists that this is what he does mean. For “receive circumcision” had become a technical phrase meaning “become a proselyte,” and we know that women as well as men underwent the ritual of proselytism. The idea of physical circumcision had given way to the general meaning “become a proselyte.” The following “he is under obligation” does not mandate that Paul is talking only about males. If the word *anthrōpos* is understood to mean “anyone” (regardless of gender), then it would be natural to follow with a 3rd person masculine singular verb.

under obligation to keep the whole Torah – At first this also sounds very strange! Are we not all under obligation to obey God, to keep His whole Torah? Is this not what is reiterated time and time again in the Torah itself? Note just one example:

He said to them, “Take to your heart all the words with which I am

warning you today, which you shall command your sons to observe carefully, even all the words of this Torah.

So what does Paul mean to convey by saying that one who becomes a proselyte is obligated to keep the whole Torah? We must remember that in Paul's day (as well as in ours), the Jewish community considered the Written and Oral to be one whole. Granted, in Paul's day the Oral Torah was still evolving (and to some extent it continued and continues to evolve), yet the rulings of the Sages, and particularly the rulings of the Sanhedrin, were practically received as on par with the written Torah. In practice, the Oral Torah at times even took precedence over the Written Torah, so much so that Yeshua Himself could charge the leaders of His day with setting aside the Torah for the sake of their traditions (Mark 7:8).³

It is clear that the proselyte was required to submit to both the Written and the Oral Torah:

Our Rabbis taught: A certain heathen once came before Shammai and asked him, 'How many Torot have you?' 'Two,' he replied: 'the Written Torah and the Oral Torah.' 'I believe you with respect to the Written, but not with respect to the Oral Torah; make me a proselyte on condition that you teach me the Written Torah [only]. [But] he scolded and repulsed him in anger. When he went before Hillel, he accepted him as a proselyte. On the first day, he taught him, Alef, beth, gimmel, daleth; the following day he reversed [them] to him. 'But yesterday you did not teach them to me thus,' he protested. 'Must you then not rely upon me? Then rely upon me with respect to the Oral [Torah] too. (b.*Shabbat* 31a)

Furthermore, the proselyte was clearly under obligation to observe all of the Oral Torah:

Our Rabbis taught: If at the present time a man desires to become a proselyte, he is to be addressed as follows: 'What reason have you for desiring to become a proselyte; do you not know that Israel at the present time are persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed and overcome by afflictions?' If he replies, 'I know and yet am unworthy', he is accepted forthwith, and is given instruction in some of the minor and some of the major commandments. He is informed of the sin [of the neglect of the commandments of] Gleanings, the Forgotten Sheaf, the Corner and the Poor Man's Tithe. He is also told of the punishment for the transgression of the commandments. Furthermore, he is addressed thus: 'Be it known to you that before you came to this condition, if you had eaten suet you would not have been punishable with *karet*, if you had profaned the Sabbath you would not have been punishable with stoning; but now were you to eat suet you would be punished with *karet*; were you to profane the Sabbath you would be punished with stoning'. And as he is informed of the punishment for the transgression of the commandments, so is he informed of the reward granted for their fulfillment. He is told, 'Be it known to you that the world to come was made only for the righteous, and that Israel at the present time are unable to bear either too much prosperity, or too much suffering'. He is not,

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3 See my essay, "Can We Speak of 'Law' in the New Testament in Monolithic Terms?", available at www.torahresource.com/ArticlesEnglish.html.

however, to be persuaded or dissuaded too much. If he accepted, he is circumcised forthwith. Should any shreds which render the circumcision invalid remain, he is to be circumcised a second time. As soon as he is healed arrangements are made for his immediate ablution, when two learned men must stand by his side and acquaint him with some of the minor commandments and with some of the major ones. When he comes up after his ablution he is deemed to be an Israelite in all respects. (b. *Yevamot* 47a-b)

Now this situation would cause a true dilemma for the Gentile believer in Galatia. Since the Oral Torah at this time was more and more requiring a separation of Jew and Gentile, and marking the Gentile and his house out as unclean, how would the proselyte function within the body of Messiah if he had obligated himself under oath to observe the entire Oral Torah? He could not rightfully eat with the Gentile! Such a separation in the body of Messiah would undermine the very unity for which Messiah had suffered. Rather than creating a situation where the Gentile believed he would finally be accepted by his Jewish brother, becoming a proselyte would simply cause further divisions.

But what is more, the act of eating together was a confession of being members of the same covenant. Paul's rebuke of Peter had come over this very issue. To tell a Gentile that he was not welcomed at your table (as the Oral Torah might require in some cases), or to decline the invitation of a Gentile believer to eat in his home (note Peter's initial response to the idea that he should go to the home of Cornelius, Acts 10:28), was equally to deny that the Gentile was a member of God's family—a fellow covenant member. Becoming a proselyte would require a separation based upon the fact that the non-proselyte was not actually in the covenant.

Here, once again, the issue boiled down to "who was in and who was out." For Paul, being "in" meant being "in Messiah." As the quintessential Israelite, to be in Messiah meant to be "in Israel" in the most obvious of ways. To deny such a one the full rights of covenant membership was ultimately to deny Yeshua.⁴

4 You have been severed from Messiah, you who are seeking to be justified by Torah; you have fallen from grace.

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Paul now essentially repeats what he has already said in v. 2: the Messiah is of no benefit for those who receive the message of the Influencers. For if one believes that something must be added to the work of Messiah in terms of being reckoned righteous before God, then one has entirely missed both the infinite debt owed on account of one's sin, and the necessary infinite price paid by the Yeshua. Such a position means that those who had formerly confessed Yeshua as the Messiah would, in fact, render the work of Messiah without effect (*καταργέω*, *katargeō*, "to destroy," "render of no effect," translated "severed" by the NASB) in terms of their own salvation. The fact that Paul puts this in the past (aorist) tense should be understood to mean that those who were receiving the message of the Influencers were already heading down the path of destruction. One could presume that Paul uses such forceful language in hopes of turning some back, and guarding others from following their waywardness.

4 For further exegesis on 5:3 and its parallel structure within the opening paragraph of chapter 5, see the excursus below, beginning on page 215.

seeking to be justified by Torah – Once again, this is not to be understood as so many since the time of the reformation have understood it. No one, including the Influencers, were teaching a message that if one kept the Torah perfectly, one would be declared righteous (justified) by God. Nor was anyone teaching that if one strove to do his best in obeying the Torah, he would be justified. As noted before in our study, the prevailing theology of Paul’s day was that Israel was considered righteous in God’s eyes because He had chosen her and had promised her blessing. Based upon verses such as Isaiah 60:21 (וְעַמֶּךָ כֻּלָּם צְדִיקִים), “and your people, all of them, are righteous”), the rabbis derived the teaching that Israel (God’s people) are declared righteous by God. This left only one option for the Sages when it came to Gentiles: they must become Jews in order to be declared righteous (justified). “Seeking to be justified by the Torah,” then, was seeking to find right standing with God through following the rabbinic ritual of proselytism, a ritual which they taught as Torah. For Gentiles who had confessed Yeshua to be the only way to stand right before God, “seeking” righteousness through acquiring “legal Jewish status” was, at the same time, to confess that one was not yet righteous in God’s eyes, and was therefore likewise a denial of the completed and perfect work of Messiah.

you have fallen from grace – Dunn writes:

“... like a withered flower falling off from its stem to the ground (James 1:11; 1Pet 1:24 [cf. Is 40:6]), or like a ship failing to hold the course which leads to safety and falling away into disaster (cf. Acts 27:26, 29). God’s grace in Christ ... is like the stem which supports the flower and through which the life-sustaining sustenance flows. Or like the channel which leads to safety between the rocks of disaster, a course from which they were in danger of being driven by dangerous currents and cross winds.”⁵

To “fall from grace” means to leave the truth of God’s grace, that right standing before Him is a matter of His gracious gift, not something attached to one’s group identity.

At first this language could sound as though Paul is teaching that one who is genuinely saved could lose their salvation. But we must remember that God gives His grace to more than His redeemed ones. For these Gentiles in Galatia, they had experienced God’s grace by the very fact that they had been privileged to listen to the reading of the Scriptures, and to be taught the truth about God. Even Paul’s visit there, and his bringing them the Gospel, was a matter of God’s grace. Paul’s point in using the phrase “fallen from grace” was to emphasize that if the Gentiles, who claimed at one time to be believers in Yeshua, turned from the Gospel and followed the teaching of the Influencers, they would be despising the very acts of grace which God had already demonstrated on their behalf.

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