

# Slavery and Freedom in the Epistle to the Galatians

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## Abstract

*This article surveys the Pauline teaching in the Epistle to the Galatians of the status of Christians before and after their conversion as it fits the imagery of slavery, as is often used in the New Testament. The first section deals with the pre-salvation status of Paul's readers and their slavery to Satan. The second section describes their release from that slavery into freedom. The final section shows the limits of that freedom by describing the post-salvation status of Paul's audience.*

## Introduction

As a letter that is primarily written as a warning to believers to not fall prey to false teachers – deceivers who wanted to impose the burden of the law on them<sup>1</sup> – s displayed by the unprecedentedly strong opening, the epistle to the Galatians has much to say about slavery and freedom. In fact, second only to the message of free salvation by grace through faith,<sup>2</sup> freedom is one of the major topics Paul was concerned with in this short but powerful letter.

- 1 Much research has been done and many volumes have been written in an attempt to identify Paul's opponents in Galatians. Yet, most of the proposed interpretations have remained unconvincing and "the traditional understanding of Galatian heretics as judaizers appears to be still the most likely view" (Fung, 1988:7).
- 2 These two topics are very much intertwined and no attempt to completely separate them would be successful, nor would such an endeavor be helpful.

Paul was writing to people who were “in danger of committing spiritual suicide” (George, 1994:22). After receiving the gospel of grace, they were contemplating submitting themselves to the precepts of the Law of Moses. Therefore, Paul had to intervene. The seriousness of his task is immediately visible in the opening greeting of the letter. Contrary to Paul’s custom, the first verses of Galatians contain no thanksgiving. Prompted by the danger these believers were in, Paul wrote as if he had little time. He was being brief, and any available space was needed to warn the Galatians.

The gospel was under attack. Legalism was threatening to enter into the Galatian churches. The freedom those believers had experienced was about to get severely limited. On the other extreme, as a natural reaction to legalism, libertarianism was also a potential threat.

Considered by many scholars to be the summary verse of the whole epistle, 1:4 lays the foundation: Christians used to be slaves, but now they are rescued. That liberation comes not from their efforts, but from Christ’s selfless giving of Himself. This idea of their previous slavery is presented in many ways. One that is very often used, though subtly, is Paul’s use of the word ὑπὸ. In reference to different objects, Paul writes to his readers that they used to be under the Law, under a curse, under sin, etc.

Paul made it his mission to remind the Galatian Christians of their previous state, of their slavery. Also, he would have failed had he not written about their freedom as well. Still, that would not be enough. As former slaves, now set free, they had a different kind of bond keeping them from simply doing whatever they wanted to.

This threefold mission of the apostle is the basic outline for this paper. For starters, what it is that these believers were subject to as slaves will be observed. The observation will start with their slavery of rebellion: a slavery to the present evil age, to their sinful flesh, to the law that curses, and, finally, to false gods.

Following that will be the important fact of their liberation. What does it mean that they are now free? How did they receive that freedom? What Paul calls their rescue, their redemption and their adoption will be addressed. Last, but not least, the section will end by looking at the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ - their (and our) freedom-giver.

The end of this paper is reserved for a survey of Paul’s teaching about a new kind of slavery. The Christians’ freedom is not without boundaries. This freedom (which can be called a slavery of obedience) is lived out by being Christ’s slave, by belonging to Christ, fulfilling the law of Christ, being a new creation, and walking by the rule.

In the presentation of the material under these three headings, there will inevitably be some overlap. Many of the passages that speak of the slavery of

rebellion have much to say about freedom and are also crucial when considering the slavery of obedience. Also, much of the argumentation will be by implication. Some of Paul's ideas can be seen by looking at what he did not say, and he affirms some principles by denying their logical opposites.

## Slavery of Rebellion

### Slavery to the Evil Age

As mentioned above, in this letter, Paul has no time for anything that does not serve his main purpose of warning the Galatian believers of the danger they have found themselves in. He immediately starts by reminding them in 1:4 of their status as those who have received salvation. In this programmatic verse, one important fact is being drawn before their (and our) eyes - “[Christ] gave Himself for our sins so that he might rescue us from this present evil age...”<sup>3</sup>

As simple as the words of this verse are, they are still rich in content. Paul first instructs them about the very work of the Savior - He gave Himself. The apostle's choice of words tells much about the nature of Christ's giving of Himself. “The participle τοῦ δόντος has a qualifying significance. Christ's self-surrender is not an historical deed merely; His whole being is characterized by giving” (Ridderbos, 1953:43n10). The act of rescuing His people was not without a cost. The price was paid by Christ's giving, but this was not just any kind of giving. Christ is characterized by giving because He gave Himself. Again, Ridderbos is correct in noticing that “the reflexive pronoun speaks of the personal and the total in His surrender (cf. Mark 10:45)” (Ridderbos, 1953:43).

After explaining the act of giving, Paul gives the cause<sup>4</sup> of the giving - for our sins. By the end of the verse, Paul elaborates on this by telling us that the reason for Christ's giving of Himself was so that He might rescue us. This phrase implies that people needed rescuing. People were in a state that, if unchanged, would bring disaster. Actually, as Hendriksen puts it, “The word rescue is very descriptive. It presupposes that those to whom it applies are in great danger from which they are unable to extricate themselves” (Hendriksen, 1968:34). The fact that people needed rescue/deliverance implies that people were captured/enslaved.

Still, of utmost importance for this section of the paper is Paul's explanation of

3 Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New American Standard Bible.

4 The cause is indicated by the preposition ὑπὲρ.

what people were rescued from. He calls it this present evil age. Here, the apostle speaks of the world itself,<sup>5</sup> and not merely of a period of time. It is the kingdom of the devil, and Luther's words are helpful in understanding this verse (Luther, 1979:15-16):

By these words then, "That He might deliver us from this present world", Paul showeth what is the argument of the epistle; ... That Christ hath put away sin and hath delivered us from the tyranny and kingdom of the devil; that is to say, from this wicked world, which is an obedient servant, and a willing follower of the devil his god.

By virtue of physical birth, humans are brought under the dominion of the prince of this evil age. They belong to him. "As many then as are in the world are the bond-slaves of the devil, constrained to serve him and to do at his pleasure" (Luther, 1979:14). Satan has authority over the inhabitants of this world which Paul calls evil. Again, Luther has the right words, when he says that

... he calleth it evil, because whatsoever is in this world, is subject to the malice of the devil reigning over the whole world. For this cause the world is the devil's kingdom. For there is in it nothing but ignorance, contempt, blasphemy, hatred of God, and disobedience against all the words and works of God. In and under this kingdom of the world are we (Luther, 1979:14, cf. Bruce, 1982:76).

As such, this evil age is clearly under God's judgment. His wrath is revealed against it (Rom 1:18; cf. John 3:36) while it stands under a curse (Gen 3:17-19; Rom 8:20-22) and the whole of human history is moving towards the future judgment when God will bring Satan's rule to an end (Rev 20:11-15). Hence, the rescue from this present evil age is "... a redemption from this world as a doomed place (cf. Gen 19:16 ff.)" (Ridderbos, 1953:44).

## **Slavery to Sinful Flesh**

Part of this aspect of the unbeliever's slavery has been briefly discussed in the previous section where it was seen that Paul wrote how Christ gave Himself to rescue us, and the cause for that were our sins (1:4a). Much more can be said about slavery to sinful flesh using two other passages - 3:22 and 5:16-21.

In the former, Paul writes that "... the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe." Not much more is said about this slavery to sin in this context. Paul

5 Morris calls it the "present world system" (Morris, 1996:37).

limits himself to simply stating that fact. Still, the following observations can be made.

First, the slavery is described as a state of being shut up.<sup>6</sup> The Greek word συνέκλεισεν appears only four times in the New Testament. One time it has a literal meaning of catching fish in a net (Lk 5:6), and the other three uses refer to spiritual confinement (under sin - here in Gal 3:22; under disobedience - in Rom 11:32; and under the law - in Gal 3:23). So, without further developing the idea, Paul here speaks of being somehow constricted by sinful flesh. Secondly, the slavery is all-encompassing. Everyone is under it. Paul leaves no room for excuses to any human being. Scripture has shut up everyone under this slavery to sinful flesh. Scripture has “brought together as in a prison-house all human life... In that prison, sin by its power and curse makes it impossible to share in salvation” (Ridderbos, 1953:142). Thirdly, the master of whom we are slaves in this verse is sin. Every human being, as a descendant of a rebellious representative - Adam - is a slave to the inherited sinful nature (cf. Rom 5:12-19).

More about this slavery is seen in the next passage - 5:16-21. At the beginning, Paul writes, “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want” (NIV). The idea of doing something against one’s own will is very telling of the slavery to sinful flesh. The basic meaning of δοῦλος is that of being subjected as a slave to the will of someone else. In the act of serving as a δοῦλος, “human autonomy is set aside and an alien will takes precedence of one’s own” (Rengstorf, 1964:261). Hence, according to this verse, humans are subjected as slaves to their own sinful nature that makes them behave as they do not want to behave. As subjects to sinful flesh, a human “... may will to obey the Spirit, but the flesh will restrict him” (Gromacki, 2002:164).

## **Slavery to the Law that Curses**

Even closer to Paul’s main argument in this epistle than slavery to sinful flesh, but not completely unrelated to it, is slavery to the Mosaic Law. As noted in the introduction, the problem that the Galatian churches were facing was an infiltration of judaizers. They wanted to subject the Gentile Christians to the Mosaic Law by forcing them into circumcision and making them uphold the dietary laws.

6 Other translations are worth noting: “imprisoned” (ESV), “captured” (ISV), “concluded” (KJV), and especially some that use phrases such as “prisoner(s) of sin” (NIV, NLT). The Greek word συγκλείω “is a technical term for locking up, keeping in detention” (Ridderbos, 1953:142).

Yet, Paul is adamant in denying such a need. In order to prove that Christians are not obliged to keep the Law, Paul speaks of the role of the Law in 3:1-5:12. In several crucial passages, the apostle presents being under the Law as a slavery to it.

First, in 2:3-5 Paul recounts his experience in Jerusalem. There, he and his co-workers were confronted by “false brothers secretly brought in – who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery” (2:4; ESV, emphasis added). Paul is very clear here that, had he circumcised Titus - a Gentile Christian - it would amount to enslaving him to the whole of the Law that demanded that rite (cf. 5:1-3).

Further on in his recollection of past events, Paul writes of Peter’s lapse. He summarizes his response to the behavior of Peter, Barnabas and other Jewish Christians that “joined them in hypocrisy” with these words: “But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, ‘If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?’” (2:14, emphasis added). By his choice of words, Paul shows that this was no small matter. He first speaks of Peter compelling the Gentile Christians, and he uses the same word which he used in 2:3 to describe the actions of the false brothers that demanded that Titus be circumcised (George, 1994:180). He also uses a word that occurs only here in the New Testament - *ιουδαΐζειν*: “to become a Jew”, “to turn Jew”. According to Paul, then, Peter was, by his actions, trying to force the Gentile believers to become Jews.

Most importantly for this paper is the fact that Paul puts this act of “forcing to become Jews” in strong opposition to the gospel of freedom. His rebuke was prompted when he saw “they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel.” In the remainder of the letter, Paul shows that, according to the gospel of Jesus Christ, all who believe are free from the Law. They do not have to become Jews first in order to get saved. Clearly, Paul saw legalistic Judaism as slavery to the Law. No Gentile who hears the gospel would willingly subject him/herself to the Law, without being forced.

The reason for his strong opposition to any judaizing within the church is seen in 3:10, 13:

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’ ... Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’ (ESV, emphasis added).

The Law brings a curse to anyone who does not keep it perfectly. It demands perfect obedience (v. 10b, quoting Deut 27:26). As stated above, the idea of slavery

is one of losing one's own will and following someone else's perfectly. That is the effect of the Law. People under the Law must do whatever it says. The Law is the master; those under it are its slaves. Any infraction, even the smallest, brings a curse on the transgressor.

However, Paul does not stop there in describing the slavery to the law that curses. In the following section (3:19-29), he further explains it by giving his readers the role of the Law of Moses. Here there is an extensive use of ὑπὸ. Paul says that the basic role of the Law is to keep people "in custody under" itself (v. 23). By coming to the faith, believers are no longer "under a tutor" (v. 25) - i.e. the Law.

That this speaks of slavery to the law that curses is more clear in the following passage (4:1-7). The beginning of the passage "show[s] that these verses are intended as elaboration of what has been said in the preceding verses (3:23-29)" (Fung, 1988:179). So, Paul explains here in greater detail how people were held in slavery to the law that curses until faith came.

Those who were "kept in custody under the law" (3:23) were considered as minors. As such, they were "'no different from,' that is 'no better than,' a slave as far as freedom of action (though not legal status) is concerned" (Fung, 1988: 179). But, by faith in Christ, believers lose their status as slaves. In no ambiguous terms, Paul states, "You are no longer a slave" (4:7). Hendriksen puts it well when he says that "the shackles of bondage to the law have been thrown off" (Hendriksen, 1968:162). This, of course, implies previous slavery, previous bondage to the law that curses.

A short note should also be made about the implication made in 4:4-5. Here, Paul says that Christ was "born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons." Upon better inspection, these lines make a strong connection between being "born of a woman" and being "born under law". The first phrase clearly speaks of Jesus' humanity. That he was born of a woman means that he was truly human. He shared human nature completely, and his incarnation was not just an illusion as the Docetic Gnostics would argue. The second phrase is used as a synonym for the first - the point being made that being human means being in slavery to the law.

## **Slavery to False Gods**

Closely connected to the slavery to the law that curses, is the slavery to false gods of which Paul also speaks in 4:1-9. The connection is following: In 3:6-29, Paul writes about the previous slavery of the Jewish Christians to the Mosaic Law. In 4:1, he applies the same principle to the Gentile Christians who have not been subjected to the written Law of Moses. Nevertheless, they were slaves as much as their Jewish counterparts. Timothy George puts it well:

This application links Paul's earlier discussion of the Jewish tutelage under the law in 3:23-25 with the pre-Christian experience of the Galatian believers who were just as enslaved in their pagan idolatry as the Jews had been in their servitude to the law (George, 1994:295).

Therefore, with these verses, Paul was warning the Galatians of the danger of submitting themselves to the Law which the judaizers were trying to get them to do. He was telling them that this new slavery would be no different than their previous idolatrous slavery to the "demonic slave holders" (George, 1994:298) or to "the evil sham gods" (George, 1994:313). Although the meaning of "the elemental things" (τὰ στοιχεῖα<sup>7</sup>) is heavily debated, this author understands the phrase to refer to demons, primarily because of the context (v. 8 speaks of the "so-called gods that do not even exist" [NLT]) and the parallel use of the phrase in Colossians (in that context, Paul speaks of "the rulers and authorities" - which many scholars believe refers to spiritual beings).

As briefly noted above, after mentioning their slavery to the "elemental things", Paul writes an explicit reminder to the Gentile Christians in Galatia that they "were slaves to those which by nature are no gods". Obviously, this refers to their idolatrous practices in their pre-Christian state. "Here, then, we have a further description of the enslavement from which Christ has liberated his people: they were in bondage to counterfeit gods, 'dumb idols' (τὰ εἰδωλα τὰ ἄφωνα), as they are called in 1 Cor 12:2" (Bruce, 1982:202).

In summary, the epistle to the Galatians is anything but silent about the previous state of Paul's readers. They were slaves in bondage to foreign wills. Their masters were many, starting with the evil age - which is a general reference to the all-encompassing slavery to the "god of this world" (2 Cor 4:4). This slavery produced others: to their sinful flesh, to the law that curses, and to false gods. Without the regeneration and the indwelling Spirit of God, they were unable to disobey the will of their sinful nature. Before coming to faith in Christ, they were under various masters as their guardians, required to offer perfect obedience. Alienated from the true and living God, they were slaves of false gods, which are non-gods in reality.

Much of the description of this slavery is by implication or as negative statements such as "you are no longer a slave" (4:7, emphasis added) or "you desire to be enslaved all over again" (4:9, emphasis added). Yet, Paul's main point is not just to paint a grim picture without a solution, a pronouncement of bondage devoid of any hope and without a message of liberation for these slaves. Most of

7 The word occurs only seven times in the New Testament (Gal 4:3, 9; Col 2:8, 20; Heb 5:12; 2 Pet 3:10, 12), and only three of those references have the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου (Gal 4:3; Col 2:8,20).



the passages thus far mentioned are set against a backdrop of Christ's work as a liberator. Therefore, the following section will focus on the positive side of this paper's topic - the freedom in Galatians.

## Freedom

As stated in the introduction, the topics of slavery and freedom in Galatians are so intertwined that there must necessarily be a certain amount of overlap in writing about them. Some passages used to explain the pre-Christian slavery are used again here to explain the act of liberation from it, but with a different emphasis.

### Slaves are Rescued

At the very beginning of the epistle, in 1:4, Paul explains to the Galatians how "Christ's self-oblation not only procures for his people the forgiveness of their past sins; it delivers them from the realm in which sin is irresistible into the realm where he himself is Lord" (Bruce, 1982:75). In other words, Christ's work on the cross has brought about liberation from Satan's realm of slavery into God's realm of freedom. "It consists also of a loosing of the saints from the sinful ties of this world, and of a liberation from the divine curse and wrath which rest on this world..." (Ridderbos, 1953:44).

The verb 8 translated in the English translations as "rescue" (e.g. NIV, NAS, ISV) or "deliver" (e.g. ESV, KJV) is the aorist middle subjunctive form of ἐξαιρέω and in the New Testament and the Septuagint it speaks of an act of snatching from the hands of one's enemies that have evil intentions or of plucking out one's eye that causes one to sin. The idea behind it is that rescue is a necessary action in order to avoid serious and permanent injury, damage or even death. And with it, the whole situation is reversed. Formerly in danger, those rescued are now safe from that particular danger.

Without this rescue, the Galatian Christians would still be slaves to the evil age. They would be under bondage to the will of Satan. By virtue of it, they are free. According to the will of the Father, Jesus Christ has rescued them. As the nation of Israel was delivered from bondage in Egypt, so Christians are delivered from the slavery of this world.

8 Gr. ἐξέληται from ἐξαιρέω: "to deliver, pluck out, rescue" (used six times in the New Testament - Matt 5:29; 18:9; Ac 7:10, 34; 12:11; 23:27; 26:17; and here in Galatians [N.B.: Paul uses it only once - in this verse]).

## Slaves are Redeemed

Paul speaks of Christians' redemption from former slavery in 3:13 and 4:5a. In the former, he writes that "Christ redeemed us," and in the latter he speaks of Christ's incarnation as his coming "to redeem". With this point, the closest connection to the slavery metaphor is made. In New Testament times, slaves were considered as objects to be sold and bought on a market. They were not persons, but property. One of the ways a slave could regain his/her freedom was by redemption - "a slave might be set free on payment of a price (which he himself might painfully acquire and in due course pay to his owner)" (Morris, 1996:106). In this case, though, humans have not paid the price for our own freedom since the subject in both verses is Christ, and people are the objects.

In both these texts, Paul uses the word ἐξαγοράζω, meaning "to buy out of the hands of a person; to redeem, set free" (Mounce, 2006:1146). By Christ's death on the cross, believers "are redeemed, bought out of the effect of the curse that rested on them, and brought into the glorious liberty of the people of God" (Morris, 1996:107).

This fact has strong implications on the present status of Christians before their redeemer. More about these implications will be written in the last part of this paper. Suffice it to say for now that an idea of a price is a very important element of the whole act of redemption, and that it also contains the idea of a change of ownership.

## Slaves are Adopted

One of the most shocking statements made about the change that happened in the life of a former slave once redeemed by Christ's sacrifice is made in 4:5b-7. It is hinted at in 3:26, but fully developed in chapter 4. In this epistle, redeemed sinners are not described merely as slaves bought with a price. Their freedom is spoken of in much richer terms than that. In his rescuing act of redemption, Christ bought us who were under the law "so that we might receive adoption as sons." The noun "adoption" is a rendering of the Greek τὴν υἰοθεσίαν. The word is used five times in the New Testament (Rom 8:15, 23; 9:4; Gal 4:5; Eph 1:5). Once it speaks of Israel's adoption as a nation, once of our adoption as a future event, and the remaining three times of our redemption through Christ's sacrifice, as in this verse.

What Paul means by this is that God has not only given freedom to the slaves He bought, but He has also made them His children. The believer "is no longer a slave but has become a son" and "as son is also an heir" (Ridderbos, 1953:158). But this adoption is beyond comparison in the human realm, as Hendriksen

(Hendriksen, 1968:160) points out:

With respect to this adoption it is rather useless to look for human analogies, for it surpasses anything that takes place on earth. It bestows upon its recipients not only a new name, a new legal standing, and a new family-relationship, but also a new image, the image of Christ (Rom 8:29). Earthly parents may love an adopted child ever so much. Nevertheless, they are, to a certain extent, unable to impart their spirit to that child; but when God adopts, he imparts to us the Spirit of his Son, as Paul indicates by continuing..."

With this adoption comes freedom. In his analogy, Paul previously mentioned minors who were under the guardianship of the law. Because of that, they had no freedom. But now, as full-fledged sons, that freedom is theirs.

As already mentioned, this statement is shocking. While the idea of buying a slave's freedom was common, the idea of adopting a slave was unheard of. What Christians have received in Christ's sacrifice is something that is completely opposite to the slavery they used to be in. Former servants of Satan have become sons of God. Former sinners servile to their flesh have received a new nature indicated by the indwelling of God's Spirit. Formerly cursed by the law, they have become heirs of God's kingdom. Formerly servants of false gods, they now call the only true and living God their Father.

## **The Freedom-Giver**

At this point, some space should be given to show what Paul says in the epistle to the Galatians about the Person who is responsible for this dramatic change. What can be found about Christ who has rescued, redeemed, and adopted former slaves of the evil age, sinful flesh, the law that curses, and false gods? Paul's view of Christ can be divided into two categories: His person and His work.

Christ's person: First and foremost, Paul sees Jesus as Lord. In four verses (1:3a, 1:19; 6:14, 18) Paul uses the title κύριος for Jesus. "The word was used in a variety of ways. It could denote the owner of slaves, or it could be used in ordinary society as a polite form of address (like our 'sir')" (Morris, 1996: 36). It is also used in the Septuagint as a substitute for God's name (YHWH). Much more will be said about the implications of this in the last section of this paper.

Secondly, in relation to that title, Paul sees Jesus as the obedient Son of God. 4:4 reads, "When the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son" (cf. 1:16). Everything that Christ did in order to bring our freedom was done in obedience to the will of His Father, as told in 1:4b. Christ's sonship is the basis for our sonship. He, as God's sent Son, died in our place, and that is why Paul can write of God as "our Father" (1:3a, 4c; 4:6).

Third, Christ is also merciful, as Paul writes in 1:3, 1:6 and 6:18. It is surprising that Paul does not write more about the mercy of God or Jesus in this epistle. Perhaps, since he highlights slavery so much, Paul feels it is more than obvious that the freedom Christians receive is only possible because of the mercy of God. A slave is always dependent on the mercy of his/her master. Not able to own anything or to make free decisions, a slave would not live if it were not for mercy.

Christ's work: What Christ did on our behalf and for our benefit is described as "the Gospel of Christ" - τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ Χριστοῦ (1:7; cf. 1:11, 12) in the epistle to the Galatians. The message of God's Son as the one who rescues, redeems, and adopts, is good news to slaves who are in bondage. That gospel has several elements to it that Paul mentions throughout the epistle.

First of all, the gospel is about Christ crucified on the cross. So, Paul writes that he was "crucified with Christ" (2:20). Also, Paul reminds the "foolish Galatians" that before their very eyes, "Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified" (3:1). In the center of the gospel Paul was proclaiming, was the crucified Christ and it was "the cross of Christ" (6:12, 14) that Paul was boasting about.

Secondly, crucified on the cross, Christ was cursed: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" (ESV). Quoting Deut 21:23, Paul writes of the gospel as a message of a great exchange: people were supposed to be cursed by God, yet they are not. He became a curse "for us" (ὕπερ<sup>9</sup> ἡμῶν), which "is the thought of substitution" (Ridderbos, 1953:127, emphasis in the original). How, exactly, Jesus was cursed on the cross is well explained by Bruce: "By his lifelong obedience (cf. Rom 5:19) he remained immune from the curse of the law, yet the circumstances of his death brought him unavoidably under that curse" (Bruce, 1982:164).

Third, the gospel of the crucified and cursed Christ brings blessings to those He died for. In the following verse (3:14), Paul gives the reason for this exchange. Christ was cursed on the cross in place of humans "in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

This, then, is what Paul has in mind when he writes of the gospel of Christ Jesus, at least in this epistle. Still, it is not only the message of Christ's work that is to be heralded, but Christ Himself is the message that Paul was separated to

9 For a more thorough study of the use of the preposition ὑπερ for expressing the idea of substitution in the New Testament, see the author's forthcoming article in the proceedings of the first International Theological Symposium held at the Adventist Theological College in Marusevec on July 23-25, 2011.

proclaim (1:16). Christ's person and His work are inseparable. What He did has meaning only because of who He is, and who He is was defined, in part, by what He did.

## Slavery of Obedience

Having shown how any unbeliever, Jew or Gentile, is a slave to the evil age, to sinful flesh, to the law that curses and to false gods until being saved by the liberating act of rescue, redemption, and adoption by Jesus Christ, another kind of slavery portrayed in this epistle will now be portrayed. There is an important difference between these two slaveries. While the first one is something from which one needs to be rescued, the other is something one needs to be rescued for. Freedom gained by Christ's sacrifice is not a complete, unlimited, and unqualified freedom. In Christianity, former slaves have been freed not to live as they please, but rather to serve their master who has bought them by His precious blood. Consider the following ways Paul has described the slavery of obedience.

### Being Christ's Slave

In New Testament times, as mentioned above, the selling and buying of slaves at a slave market was a familiar scene. Perhaps with that image in mind, Paul wrote about Christians' freedom from previous slavery in this epistle. More specifically, Paul may have been aware of a slave that had been bought from one master and then belonged to another.

This is clearly how he saw himself, as is evident in 1:10: "Now, am I indeed persuading people or God? Or, am I seeking to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be Christ's slave" (my translation). It is odd that not a single English translation renders the word δούλος as a slave, yet that is its meaning. "Doulos is often used metaphorically to describe the sole commitment of one person to another" (Mounce, 2006:633, emphasis in the original)<sup>10</sup>. In this verse, Paul is probably defending himself against a charge that he is a people-pleaser.

Paul concludes this part of this argument with a statement of the impossibility of trying to please people, since he is Christ's slave. Since a slave is wholly at the

10 For more about this word and its synonyms, see: Rengstorf, 1964:261-288 and Trench, 1948:30-34. For a treatment of the word δούλος in an entire monograph, see: John MacArthur, *Slave* (2010).

disposal of his master, it is impossible for Paul, the slave of Christ, to be seeking the approval of the Galatians (cf. Eph 6:6). The use of the term slave brings out the wholeheartedness of Paul's allegiance to Christ. It also brings out something of the wholeheartedness that must always characterize Christians. The Galatians had evidently charged Paul with making the Christian way too easy when he said that it was not necessary to keep the whole law." (Morris, 1996:46-47)<sup>11</sup>

He denies this charge for a single reason - he is Christ's slave. When he says he would not be Christ's slave if he would seek to please people, he plainly means that he actually is Christ's slave. This is not an uncommon way for him to describe himself. "Paul repeatedly calls himself a 'slave' (δοῦλος) of Christ (Rom 1:1, etc.), implying that he was unreservedly at Christ's disposal" (Bruce, 1982:86).

His will was not free to act, speak, or write whatever it wanted, but was rather submitted to the will of its master. His goal was not to be liked by people, but to be approved by his master. "The service of Christ goes straight against the grain of what people naturally love to hear (cf. 5:11 and 6:12); the service of Christ demands precisely a readiness to surrender everything for His sake, and most particularly this favor of men" (Ridderbos, 1953:56).

## **Belonging to Christ**

Previously, in the section about the redemption Christ accomplished in his death, it was noted that it brings with itself an idea of ownership. That idea was also clearly developed by Paul in this epistle. In several texts, he speaks of Christians belonging to Christ. In 3:29, he writes, "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise." Regarding the application of Christ's sacrifice, 5:24 reads, "Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." Besides these explicit and clear references to belonging to Christ, Paul also teaches that the churches in Judea belong to Christ (1:22), and that believers should do good to all people and "... especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (6:10, NIV). Obviously, there is a certain sense of belonging that should be felt by everyone who has been freed from previous slavery.

The idea of belonging to Christ is also expressed as being "in Christ".<sup>12</sup> Four times in 3:24-28, Paul writes that the Law was our tutor "to lead us to"<sup>13</sup> Christ, so

11 See also Morris' note number 45 on page 46.

12 The idea behind the phrase "in Christ" is that of a body or a family. See Bruce, 1982:183-185.

13 Although εἰς Χριστὸν literally means "in Christ", because of the context of this verse, scholars disagree as to whether it has a purposive ("unto Christ") or temporal ("until Christ") meaning,

that we may be justified by faith” (3:24), that “in Christ Jesus [we] are all sons of God, through faith” (3:26, ESV)<sup>14</sup>, that every Christian has been “baptized into Christ<sup>15</sup>” (3:27), and, finally, that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (3:28). As a conclusion to this passage, and as proof that “in Christ” refers to “belonging to Christ”, Paul writes, “And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise” (3:29).

## **Fulfilling the Law of Christ**

Slavery of obedience is further supported by the exhortation in 6:2: “Always carry one another’s burdens, and so obey the whole of Christ’s Law” (WNT). As Christ’s slaves who belong to Christ, Christians are not without law. They have law and with it an obligation to obey it. This might seem contradictory since Paul made such an effort to show that believers are free from the “yoke of slavery” (5:1) which is the Law of Moses. Yet, Paul is not being legalistic here.

Ridderbos (Ridderbos, 1953:213) sees that “the bearing of another’s burden harmonizes in every respect with what Christ by word and deed taught His own. In this real love becomes manifest, the fulfillment of the whole law (cf. 5:14)”. Similarly, Bruce writes:

In fine, the “law of Christ” is for Paul the whole tradition of Jesus’ ethical teaching, confirmed by his character and conduct (cf. Rom. 13:14; 2 Cor 10:1) and reproduced within his people by the power of the spirit...” (Bruce, 1982:261).

“Serving one another”<sup>16</sup> (5:13b) further supports the idea of a slavery of obedience by fulfilling the law of Christ. Anticipating a wrong understanding of the freedom wrought by Christ, Paul urges his readers not to use their new freedom for selfish purposes. Rather, driven by love (i.e., by Christ’s law), they should be slaves to other believers.

Earlier in Galatians Paul introduced the concepts of freedom and love, but this is the first place he brought them together in a single thought. And, surprisin-

but it is most likely that in this particular verse “the preposition εἰς has temporal force: ‘until Christ’” (Bruce, 1982:183); see also Morris, 1996:119 and George, 1994:266-267.

14 This verse can be translated in two ways since the Greek reads: Πάντες γὰρ υἱοὶ θεοῦ ἐστε διὰ τῆς πίστεως ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. NAS shows the other possibility when it renders it, “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.” This author prefers the ESV’s rendering.

15 Gr. εἰς Χριστὸν ἐβαπτίσθητε.

16 Gr. δουλεύετε ἀλλήλοις.

gly, that which links freedom and love is the very thing Paul earlier said Christ has delivered us from: slavery. The English word serve does not adequately translate the Greek verb *doouleuete* behind which stands the common Greek noun for slave, *doulos*. Through love, Paul said you should make yourselves slaves to one another. Thus freedom and slavery are not mutually exclusive terms; they stand in the closest possible relationship to one another and can only be adequately defined in terms of object and goal: what we are slave to and what are we free for (George, 1994:378).

## **Submitting to the Truth**

After a whole passage written to warn Christians not to receive circumcision, and with it the yoke of the whole Law, Paul writes in 5:7, “You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth?” These words show that, prior to the arrival of the judaizing false teachers, the Galatian Christians were obedient. They knew the truth of the gospel, and they had been living according to it. These words also show that life in Christian freedom is not without a need for obedience. As noted above, the core of Christ’s law is love. Yet, that is not the only precept of that law. Obedience to truth is a characteristic of a true disciple of Christ. One who lives as Christ’s slave and who tries to fulfill the law of Christ will love the truth and eagerly submit to it.

## **Being a New Creation**

This is another way Paul describes the slavery of obedience in Galatians: “For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation” (6:15). The verse begins by stating that physical circumcision is not important in this new relationship Christians have with their Savior. One’s ethnicity or outward obedience to the law and its prescriptions are not what matters. What is crucial, though, is the reality of being part of a new creation.

What is hinted at here is the fulfillment of a promise made by God in the Old Testament. This new creation was inaugurated at Christ’s first advent, and will reach the final and complete fulfillment at his return. Those saved by Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross are part of this new creation.

As was the case with the original creation, so is the role of the new one to submit to God’s rule and to enjoy fellowship with Him in complete obedience and wholehearted worship. Adam was free, but his freedom was not without qualifications. His status as a created being demanded obedience.



## Walking by the Rule

As final evidence that the life of a liberated slave of Christ is not to be void of standards, Paul speaks of “those who will walk by this rule” in 6:16. The word translated “rule” is κανών. The root of the word refers to a straight reed and it speaks of a “prescribed range of action and duty, 2 Cor 10:13, 15, 16; met. rule of conduct or doctrine” (Mounce, 2006:1180). This verse, therefore, shows that the life of a Christian is not one of complete liberty. Christ’s followers have a standard by which they must evaluate and align their conduct.

This point is closely connected to the previously mentioned submission to the truth. The standard by which Christians are to live by is the truth of the gospel, the truth of the Scriptures to which they are to submit. Again, obedience is one of the traits that need to characterize slaves rescued from Satan and adopted into God’s family. This obedience is driven by gratitude and not fear. Slaves who walk by this standard obey it with joy. They are, as Paul puts it at the end of the verse, “the new people of God” (NLT).

It has an even closer connection to the idea of a new creation. Those who have been transferred from Satan’s reign to the rule of Christ are members of a community that has its own regulations and laws. Even the old creation, before the fall and completely free of sin, was governed by this rule: obedience to the Creator’s standards and submission to His prerogative to determine the good and the evil.

## Conclusion

Very early on in the pages of the Scriptures, in the third chapter of the book of Genesis, the problem of sin is introduced. God’s creatures rebelliously decided to reject His authority over them and to submit to another master. This other master was their own selves. Prompted and tricked by the crafty serpent, man and woman resolved to start making their own decisions. They caught a glimpse of something they thought was of great value, and they developed a strong desire for it. That which they started lusting after was freedom. They believed they must have it, no matter what the cost.

Yet, this freedom was not what they expected it to be. As creatures that were created to be dependent, they could never be completely autonomous. Having rejected God’s rule over them, people became the devil’s subjects. They became slaves. So, the story of humankind is the story of a man and a woman, created to be nothing less than God’s viceroys on the planet and to reflect God’s glory as those made in His image, but who were humbled into worthless slaves.

Only with the pages of the New Testament and the coming of the Savior

promised in Gen 3:15 does the situation start showing potential to change for the better. It took God Himself, taking the form of an enslaved human, to bring about true freedom - to bring people back under the safety of the Creator's rule. The Good News of Jesus Christ proclaims freedom to Satan's slaves.

Yet, even this new community of saved people is not free from any attempts to bring them once again into slavery. False teachers have infiltrated its ranks in order to revoke its charter of freedom. That is the story behind the epistle to the Galatians. Former slaves were freed and restored to their King, but there were some that wanted to put them under that slavery once again. They were legalists that were adding obedience to the Law to the free salvation by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. The Apostle Paul could not calmly stand by and let that happen.

In the face of the legalists and Judaizers, Paul shouted, No Longer! Now that Christ has come, we are no longer slaves but rather sons; we are no longer captive to the passions of our sinful nature but liberated to keep in step with the spirit by fulfilling the law of love (Gal 3:25; 4:7; 5:14-26)(George, 1994:36).

Some might complain upon hearing the word "slave" spoken when talking about the current status of redeemed Christians. However, that is the right word, as this epistle demonstrates. By their faith in Christ, people who used to belong to Satan as oppressed slaves are now freed to serve their rightful master. There is a fundamental difference between the two slaveries. Humans were created for one and needed to be saved from the other one, as they have now been by the person and work of Christ Jesus.

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## **Ropstvo i sloboda u Poslanici Galaćanima**

### Sažetak

Članak sagledava Pavlovo naučavanje u Poslanici Galaćanima glede statusa kršćana prije i poslije njihova obraćenja povezano sa slikom ropstva koja se često koristi u Novom zavjetu. U prvom dijelu članak se bavi s pretkršćanskom statusom Pavlovih čitatelja i njihovim ropstvom sotonu. Drugi dio opisuje oslobođenje od tog ropstva u slobodu. Zadnji dio pokazuje granice te slobode opisujući status Pavlovih čitatelja nakon spasenja.