

## Freedom from the Bondage of the Law

John Calvin

*Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law? For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. —Gal. 4:21-26*

Freedom is such a desirable thing to every one of us, that without it our lives would be little more than a living death, or at the very least, perpetual misery. Indeed, so far as we are able, we flee subjection and constraint, and covet liberty, which, according to the old proverb, is a priceless treasure. If this is true of our earthly lives, then it applies even more to the eternal salvation of our souls. Yet how many there are who are still in bondage, as if they have a noose tied around their necks! Although they claim to love freedom, they live as though they were bound in slavery. This freedom is particularly evident when people are able to rejoice in the liberty purchased for them by the Lord Jesus Christ, which brings rest to their souls. In the gospel, God declares that he delights to adopt us as his children, and in doing so, he frees us from Satan's snare and from the tyranny of sin. But there are very few who will accept this gift when it is presented to them, because of their cursed captivity to sin; they seem to prefer to be subject to their own carnal appetites, rather than to yield in obedience to God and walk in complete liberty. Paul, therefore, has good reason to scold the Galatians for living under the law, because they are rejecting the freedom and liberty that they should have enjoyed as children of God.

Now Paul gives us a symbol, a vivid picture illustrating that the very law itself reveals the poverty and misery of the human heart; yet the Galatians prefer to remain under it! For the house of Abraham is a clear symbol of the church of God. It tells us much about the state of the church. It is written that Abraham had two sons: Ishmael and Isaac (Gen. 16:1ff). Ishmael was born to Hagar, Abraham's servant, who was given to him to be his wife. But there was a serious fault here, for it was not right for him to break faith with his lawful wife, Sarah. Now, what was the reason for this union between Abraham and Hagar? It was brought about because Sarah acted hastily and rashly, believing that God was too slow about fulfilling his promise to her to provide her with offspring. She thought that she was unable to conceive. But her understanding of God's Word was poor, and she did not have the patience and contentment that faith demands. In short, this was a relationship to be condemned, an immoral union, though Abraham did not originally intend this at all. He had not been driven by wicked lust, he had simply desired to have seed through which would spring the salvation of the world. But how foolish such acts are, when we attempt this or that without being told to do so by the Word of God. When we are driven by our own rash desires, many sins occur. Thus, Ishmael was born to Hagar, the 'bondmaid', from an illicit relationship with which God was not pleased. Isaac was born to Sarah a long time after Ishmael, for Ishmael may have been sixteen years old when Isaac was born. Paul (following Moses' account) tells us that Isaac was born according to promise and Ishmael according to the flesh. Now this does not mean that Abraham was not Isaac's father, but rather that he was born through divine power; for Abraham was declining; indeed, he was half-dead and had no strength left in him! He was a hundred years old, and his wife was almost the same; she had been infertile throughout her life of roughly ninety years. The idea that she could conceive and give birth was seen as laughable when the angels brought her this message (Gen. 18:12). Therefore, Isaac was

born according to promise, for God worked a miracle in order that he might send the Lord Jesus into this world; not following the laws of nature, but through the goodness of God alone and according to his perfect will.

Thus, in the house of Abraham, we have a figure of the church: two women, both of whom gave birth to a son. As for Hagar, Paul tells us that she represents Mount Sinai, where the law was given, and we are told that this was in Arabia, to show that it was not in the holy land chosen by God as an inheritance for his people. Sarah represents Jerusalem. Not, he says, the present city, for it has changed beyond recognition. Its inhabitants have separated themselves from the law and from pure doctrine. Now, when I say the law, I do not mean it in the way Paul refers to it in this letter—the law that engenders bondage—I mean the covenant that God made with his people through the Lord Jesus Christ. Since Jerusalem at the time of Paul had rejected Jesus Christ and, therefore, broken their covenant with God, Paul says that he must refer to it as Hagar and Sinai. For the Jews, he is saying, boast about their temple and sacrifices and the like, and that they are the chosen and elect people of God, yet they are banished and excluded from the holy land, as it were, and have a meaningless connection with the law. For if we were to see Jerusalem at the time of Paul, we would realise that it was comparable to Sinai. But there is another Jerusalem: 'Jerusalem which is above'. This corresponds to the church through which we receive regeneration in God's sight. The church, through the incorruptible seed of the gospel, engenders offspring who are freeborn. For she is 'the mother of us all'. Then Paul quotes the words of Isaiah, 'Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not' (Isa. 54:1). Now, Isaiah is not referring to a particular woman here, but the church of God, using this image as a simile. For a time the church had been very dissolute and, therefore, Isaiah tells us it was as if she had been cast away. A kind of divorce had occurred between God and his people. But the prophet assures the church that he will multiply her one day, and that she would have more children than if she had always prospered and flourished. This happened when the gospel was proclaimed to the world. For the church not only comprises the children of Abraham, or one particular race; but through the holy seed of the gospel, she has brought forth an infinite number of children for God, of every nation and land, even those far-distant from our own. For God has displayed his might throughout the globe. This is the meaning of the passage that we have quoted.

Paul tells us that these things are 'an allegory'. The first point we need to make here is that Paul did not wish to deny the literal meaning of Holy Scripture. There are some people who find a curious pleasure in seeking out strange interpretations of the Scriptures. By overlooking the literal interpretation, they undermine the whole. Hence, there are countless perversions and corruptions of the truth. False allegories abound today; they are adopted by multitudes, and yet are nothing more than Satanic inventions. Because such theories are accepted and applauded, the people remain bewitched by Satan. What fine expositors they make! Yet, how are they so successful? Well, if a doctrine is neither from heaven nor from earth, it is easy for poor ignorant souls to remain in suspension between the two! Paul does not intend us to interpret Moses' story of Isaac and Ishmael as a fanciful speculation—no, he is demonstrating that this historical account reveals the state of the church, though, in those days, the only church that God presided over was that of the house of Abraham. (Of course, there was Salem, whose king was Melchisedec, but this was not clearly understood at that point. Therefore, God chose to adopt a people through Abraham, and to reveal that he wished to be called upon by a people whom he had separated from the rest of mankind.) However, we must not read Moses' account coldly, without looking any further, that is, without considering what happened to this family and applying it to the church.

Now, let us come to the central theme—the law. When Paul compares Hagar, Abraham's servant, to Mount Sinai and the law which was given on that mountain, he is not referring to the substance of the law. For the law contains many promises of salvation which were fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ; Paul himself declares this in several other passages, as we have already seen. If we take and apply the law in its proper and legitimate usage, we will see it as an incorruptible, life-giving seed,

through which God becomes our Father and sets us free. The law only engenders servitude with relation to external issues, as we have discussed before. Our forefathers of old, though they were children of God and heirs of the kingdom of heaven just like ourselves, were under tutors and governors. They were like little children, incomplete until the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Their ceremonies were like bridles or cords preventing those who observed them from enjoying the liberty that we have today through the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet, when Paul speaks of the law creating servitude, he is speaking here of the way in which the Galatians misapplied the law, for he continues by saying that those who are under such servitude will eventually be banished and excluded from the family and inheritance of God. Thus, although our forefathers lived in servitude with regard to external things, yet they were free; for the Spirit gave them a faith that overcame their bondage, as it says in the eighth chapter to the Romans. Without faith, they would have been cut off from any hope of salvation. To sum up, Paul refers to the law here in this negative way because of the particular interpretation these hypocrites had made of it, corrupting it by reducing it to the observance of petty rules, and by making their observation meritorious. In doing so, they were binding people's consciences so tightly that they were almost suffocated!

Now, Paul has adequately dealt with this subject on a previous occasion, but it would be helpful for us to remind ourselves of what he said. He drew a contrast between the law and the gospel; for those who seek justification through the law imagine that God is indebted to them if they fulfil their duty towards him. They have heard the promise that if a man keeps the law, he shall live (Lev. 18:5). They are rigorous in their law observance and even believe they have accomplished all that God requires and demands. Having such a promise before them, they await their reward, no longer believing that salvation is a free gift, but rather that they have deserved all that God has promised. Thus, eternal life becomes the expected recompense for all their meritorious deeds. So much for the law. As for the gospel, God becomes our Father when we are released from the curse of sin and Satan and, indeed, from the condemnation due to us through the law. For it is written that those who have not kept the law perfectly are accursed, as we have said before (Deut. 27:26). Thus, all are guilty; the whole world is plunged into despair without remedy, unless God withdraws the condemnation of poor sinners, and quashes the sentence he has pronounced upon them. We have now understood what Paul means when he refers here to the law. He is not saying that Moses' teachings are insufficient for a person to become a child of God, or that there are no promises of eternal salvation for mankind in the law, but simply that before Christ came into this world there was not the full enjoyment of liberty that we have today. More than this, he is informing us of the abuses of the law by hypocrites who had misinterpreted its purpose. They imagined that they could please God and obtain his favour by its observance. But Paul tells us that we remain in slavery until we are delivered by another kind of seed, that is to say, the gospel.

Now, when Paul says that Hagar or Sinai corresponds to 'Jerusalem which now is', he means that city which had once been God's sanctuary, and which, therefore, ought to have been the fountainhead of heavenly and pure doctrine. For both Isaiah and Micah tell us that 'out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem' (Isa. 2:3; Mic. 4:2). But the Jews became defiled and added their own inventions and interpretations to the purity of true doctrine. They even rejected Jesus Christ, the fountain of life. Thus, Paul tells us that this Jerusalem is like Hagar the bondmaid and Mount Sinai, which can only bring about condemnation. This is worthy of note, because it shows us that God has never favoured a place so much that he could not punish the ingratitude of its inhabitants for their misuse of his benefits; mercies which he placed at their disposal. This is Jerusalem, known as the holy city of God, his royal palace, his habitation, the place of his residence—all of these descriptions are to be found in Holy Scripture, (Psa. 48:1-3, 132:13; Matt. 4:5, 27:53). Yet, Paul tells us that it has become like Sinai, an infertile mountain in a distant and desolate area outside the borders of the holy land, which God chose as the inheritance and resting place of his elect people.

Recognising that such a change had taken place in Jerusalem, the city once chosen by God and blessed with such excellent titles, what will happen to the people who reject the gospel today? Even if they have known great honour, God can easily bring them down to ignominy. Look what is said about the towns where Jesus preached the gospel, like Capernaum and the rest; they could boast of having been first to hear the message of salvation, or that Jesus Christ preached more there than in Jerusalem itself. But we are told that such towns would be 'brought down to hell' (Matt. 11:23). It was for their rebellion and stubborn persistence in evil; their refusal to accept the grace that was offered to them in the preaching of the gospel. We know what Jeremiah said about Shiloh (Jer. 7:12). You see, the Jews boasted that they had the city of Jerusalem with its temple and altar. But Jeremiah tells them to visit Shiloh—that place where the ark rested for so many years. People would come there from all parts to worship God and bring their sacrifices, but now what would they see there? A terrifying reminder of the vengeance of God because they had misused the good things that God had originally blessed them with.

Now, let us apply this for our own instruction, so that we learn to walk in fear and wisdom, for God has been gracious to us by dwelling amongst us and establishing his royal throne to reign over us. For our part, we ought to obey him, and shelter ourselves beneath his wings in sobriety and humility. If we were to think that he is under obligation to us, then we will be audacious, opinionated and proud towards him. We would abuse the gifts that he intended to be for our well-being, and such wickedness could not go unpunished. Thus, the example of Jerusalem warns us to yield peacefully in obedience to our God, and allow him to rule over us. We must be submissive in every way, and not puffed up with pride or presumption, now that he has poured out his spiritual blessings upon us. Indeed, this ought to make us confess our dependence upon him and to humble ourselves.

Incidentally, we can see how foolish the Papists are to want to associate God with Rome; for they say it is the 'apostolic seat'. But their claims about Peter are nothing more than lies and fables. Whilst it is certain that Paul was held prisoner in Rome, and it may even be deduced that he died there, this is all that sets Rome apart. The gospel was attacked there, and that den of the devil was saturated with the blood of the martyrs, as if to provoke the wrath of God. It was here that men conspired to fight against the truth, and blot out, as far as they possibly could, the name and memory of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is all the dignity that Rome can claim! These people imagine that Rome has all the honourable titles that Jerusalem once had, though there is not a single syllable in the Scriptures to justify this. Nowhere do they tell us that God reigns there, or has chosen to dwell within its walls; nowhere is it referred to as 'mother', or as having a special honour—nothing like this at all! Paul does say that the faith of the Romans was known everywhere and that they had a good reputation (Rom. 1:8), but he is speaking of a mere handful of people. For those who ruled in Rome were certainly not Christians, yet there was a small group gathered together in hideouts, and these are the people that Paul praises and esteems. Therefore, we must never imagine that the whole of Rome belonged to the church of God! We saw what happened to Jerusalem—that she was compared to Hagar and Sinai, that is to say, that she had become a profane and polluted place. Her holiness had long been forgotten, because she had not continued in the pure doctrines of the gospel.

We can only conclude, therefore, that even those who are nearest to God, and who have enjoyed close communion with him, will be cast off like strangers if they do not persevere in holiness; for holiness is like a tie that keeps us closely bound to our God. We can see that the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ is rejected, trodden under foot, held in contempt and disdain in Rome today. Furthermore, gospel teachers are persecuted by fire and their blood is shed in that place. There is no true religion there at all now, for it is full of wickedness and corruption. If a man were to enter Rome and return with the fear of God, some good seed having been sown in his heart, it would be a miracle. It is clear that Rome is the very cavern of hell. May it please God that people would suffer broken necks rather than venture upon that city! For at this time, even the nation of France has been infected by her impiety. The majority of those in France have become nothing more than dogs and pigs, with

no more true religion than brute beasts. All the more reason, therefore, for us to heed this warning and to walk in wisdom and the fear of God, being careful that we are not deprived of the privileges that we have received because of our ingratitude. May God never wreak his terrible vengeance upon us, and make us trophies of dishonour and shame. Such is Paul's description of Jerusalem, which had formerly known such great honour.

Notice, furthermore, that under the figure of Abraham, God proclaims that he is the Father of all his own people. We have, therefore, been born of God in that we belong to his church. Yet it is not enough simply to claim that God is our Father, unless we have been truly regenerated through the incorruptible seed, which is alone the guarantee of life and eternal salvation. We may ask the question, how is it possible to be members of God's family and yet be like illegitimate offspring? The answer is that, by our iniquity and wickedness, we have corrupted the Word of God, which is his seed. This is the way Peter describes it (1 Pet. 1:23). Yes, it is true that the Word, since it proceeds from God, is spotless in itself. It sparkles with purity, and contains all the treasures of the righteousness, goodness and mercy of God. This is the nature of the Word of God, but we have devalued it and altered it according to our own whims and fancies, and added our own impurity. So then, although we may regard ourselves as children of God, yet we are bastard children, as we shall see in greater detail this afternoon, by God's good pleasure. For Paul proceeds to show that Ishmael, though the eldest son, was finally expelled from his own family. This occurred because he was illegitimate, being born to Hagar. Therefore, we are to learn that we must be born into God's family through faith in the Word of God in its purity; God then enlightens our minds through the Holy Spirit, who reveals to us the will of God. For if we alter the Word of God beyond recognition, according to our own perceptions, though it may still be called the seed of God, it will not be so in truth, for it has been corrupted.

Thus, there are so many people around today who call themselves Christians but live under false pretences. For example, the Papists say that they believe in God and seek to adhere to the Holy Scriptures, but it is evident that they have twisted them. Instead of accepting the Holy Scriptures with all due reverence, they wrest them according to their own convenience, and even mock them and joke about them! As we have said on a previous occasion, they blasphemously treat the Scriptures like a wax nose that they can mould to whatever shape they wish! They have turned everything into confusion by their contrivances! Indeed, whatever the Papists call serving God has been hatched in their own minds. There is no question of ordering one's life according to what God has commanded and decreed. No, he is dethroned, and they usurp his lawful sovereignty and attribute such authority to themselves that they subjugate consciences and create whatever laws seem good to them. This sin is too great and too evil for words. How, then, do the Papists formulate their articles of faith? It must be according to what they have determined themselves, for there is certainly nothing in them that has been drawn from the Scriptures! Never mind what is written in the Holy Scriptures; they have conclusions of their own, which they regard as the very oracles of heaven, for they are swiftly received as commonly accepted facts. When they seek our approval of such nonsense, they say that, first and foremost, these are received doctrines: we must bow to their antiquity as if it makes them prescriptive for us, and thereupon they may just cite a few passages of Scripture which they have pulled out of context for good measure. But this is a mockery, for they have wilfully defiled the Word of God. Surely even little children, aware of such great and glaring ignorance, would spit in their faces!

Thus, the Papists are a good example of what Paul is illustrating here. In other words, there are many who boast that they are children of God, and servants of the church, who are really illegitimate. They are born of corrupt seed, for instead of adhering to pure doctrine which could bring the regeneration that leads to eternal life, they have added their own doctrines and thus violated the integrity of God's Word. We are not stretching the point too far when we say that Paul's argument is borne out by the Papists today. For what is our greatest quarrel with them at this point in time? It concerns free will, meritorious acts of service, satisfaction for sin, and the rest. The Papists say that we can obtain favour in the eyes of God by our own efforts, and that we do not need the aid and

assistance of the Holy Spirit. Yes, they admit that there is some collaboration, and that God works within us up to a point; but they say that we are his helpers, and we would be most weak and useless if our virtue did not help us to gain God's favour. They also say that the grace of God is of no effect unless we add to it something of our own doing. Thus, they are building a doctrine based upon merit; the only way you can reach the kingdom of heaven is by pleasing God. You need personal merit in order to pay for the sins you have committed. This is what the Papists spout forth! Furthermore, they conclude that it is a blasphemy to say that it is impossible to keep the law of God perfectly. They claim that anybody, if he applies himself, can fully observe its requirements. Yes, it is easy to brag in this way whilst still living in darkness, for those who say these things are themselves wicked fornicators, drunkards, blasphemers, people given to all kinds of gross and sinful behaviour. We know just how holy these monks, hypocrites, crooks and vermin are!

As for ourselves, we would say that we are born slaves of sin and under the tyrannical rule of Satan. We are held so tightly in his grip that we cannot even have one righteous thought about doing good. Our nature tends wholly towards evil, just like a donkey carrying its yoke and burden, yet our sin proceeds entirely from our own wills. We are born in sin and, therefore, can do nothing else; we continually offend God until he sets us free by his Holy Spirit and grants us his liberty. Furthermore, we believe that it is impossible to keep the law of God, but that the law simply reveals our duty; it is for each one to read his condemnation therein. We must come before God in silence, as evildoers, in order to obtain grace for the offences that we have committed. We come clothed in shame, confessing that we are lost, that God might save us through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. In short, we say that it is completely beyond our powers to acquit ourselves in the eyes of God. But he comes to our aid; he does not scrutinise us or enter into account with us. When we have offended him, there is no satisfaction for sin other than the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. The only way we can be cleansed is to wash ourselves in his blood.

We see, therefore, the practical application of Paul's teaching when we consider the points of conflict between the Papists and ourselves. Though they associate with the name of God, and falsely claim to honour it, and though they say they are his children because they accept the Holy Scriptures, yet they demonstrate that their mother is Hagar and Sinai, and that they are still in bondage. They still have the yoke around their necks, and refuse to come to God to accept the liberty that he offers. They would rather usurp that which God has reserved for himself alone by justifying themselves through their own merits and by seeking to fulfil the law. They are children of the bondwoman, therefore, and must remain slaves; their end is to be cast out forever. As for us, we will see the implications of this teaching later on, but, briefly, it concerns the fact that our only means of deliverance is through the gospel. Our Lord Jesus Christ himself declares in the eighth chapter of John's Gospel that it is his role to set us free, and that this privilege was given to him by God the Father, to deliver us from all condemnation. We must, therefore, come to the Lord Jesus Christ and find all that we need in him, for it is through him that we are freed from the yoke of the law. This yoke is too heavy for us to bear: not only does it weigh us down, it actually plunges us into the pit of hell. Thus, we obtain this deliverance only through the seed which brings regeneration and complete liberty. We become children of God, and not only are we known as such in the eyes of the world, but before angels. We will finally reach the inheritance that has been obtained for us at so great a cost, and which we could never have possessed by our own merits. It can only be obtained through the One to whom it all belongs, having conferred the inheritance on us through the gospel which we hear each day.

Now, let us fall down before the majesty of our great God, acknowledging our sins, and praying that he would help us to feel them more than ever before. Then we may grow and mature more and more through genuine repentance, so that, in coming to him, we may do so in all humility and without hypocrisy. We must be ashamed of our sin to the point that we seek no other remedy than the Lord Jesus Christ. Since our great God has received us and sealed us with the grace of his adoption in our

hearts by his Holy Spirit, may we maintain the purity of the gospel, adding nothing of our own invention. May nothing be corrupted by our own notions, but may the Holy Spirit keep us obedient in the faith. In this way, as he has begun to show us his favour, we for our part will aim unswervingly for perfection. Thus, we all say, Almighty God and heavenly Father, etc.

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*Marked up by Lance George Marshall*