

Homily 4 on Galatians

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's Homily 4 on Galatians emphasizes the transition from bondage under the Law to freedom as children of God through faith in Christ.

Scripture: Galatians 4:1-15

Topics: "Christian Freedom", "New Covenant"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the significance of being children of promise and the freedom that comes from being born of the freewoman, symbolizing the Church. He emphasizes the contrast between being under the Law, represented by Hagar and Mount Sinai, and the freedom found in the New Covenant, symbolized by Sarah and the heavenly Jerusalem. Chrysostom warns against turning back to legalism and bondage after experiencing the freedom and sonship offered through Christ. He urges the congregation to embrace their identity as children of the promise, born of the Spirit, and not to inherit the fate of those who choose the path of slavery and persecution.

Transcript

Verse 1-3

But I say, that so long as the heir is a child, he differs nothing from a bond-servant, though he is lord of all; but is under guardians and stewards, until the term appointed of the father. So we also when we were children, were held in bondage under the rudiments of the world.

The word child in this place denotes not age but understanding; meaning that God had from the beginning designed for us these gifts, but, as we yet continued childish, He let us be under the elements of the world, that is, new moons and sabbaths, for these days are regulated by the course of sun and moon. If then also now they bring you under law they do nothing else but lead you backward now in the time of your perfect age and maturity. And see what is the consequence of observing days; the Lord, the Master of the house, the Sovereign Ruler, is thereby reduced to the rank of a servant.

Ver. 4, 5. But when the fullness of the time came God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, under the Law that he might redeem them which were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.

Here he states two objects and effects of the Incarnation, deliverance from evil and supply of good, things which none could compass but Christ. They are these; deliverance from the curse of the Law, and

promotion to sonship. Fittingly does he say, that we might receive, [be paid,] implying that it was due; for the promise was of old time made for these objects to Abraham, as the Apostle has himself shown at great length. And how does it appear that we have become sons? He has told us one mode, in that we have put on Christ who is the Son; and now he mentions another, in that we have received the Spirit of adoption.

Ver. 6, 7. And because you are sons, God sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father. So that you are no longer a bond-servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.

Had not we been first made sons, we could not have called Him Father. If then grace has made us freemen instead of slaves, men instead of children, heirs and sons instead of aliens, is it not utter absurdity and stupidity to desert this grace, and to turn away backwards?

Ver. 8, 9. Howbeit at that time not knowing God, you were bondage to them which by nature are no gods. But now that you have come to know God -- or rather to be known by God -- how do you turn back again to the weak and beggarly rudiments whereunto you desire to be in bondage over again.

Here turning to the Gentile believers he says that it is an idolatry, this rigid observance of days, and now incurs a severe punishment. To enforce this, and inspire them with a deeper anxiety, he calls the elements not by nature Gods. And his meaning is -- Then indeed, as being benighted and bewildered, you lay grovelling upon the earth, but now that you have known God or rather are known of Him, how great and bitter will be the chastisement you draw upon you, if, after such a treatment, you relapse into the same disease. It was not by your own pains that you found out God, but while you continued in error, He drew you to Himself. He says weak and beggarly rudiments, in that they avail nothing towards the good things held out to us.

Ver. 10. You observe days, and months, and seasons, and years.

Hence is plain that their teachers were preaching to them not only circumcision, but also the feast-days and new-moons.

Ver. 11. I am afraid of you, lest by any means I have bestowed labor upon you in vain.

Observe the tender compassion of the Apostle; they were shaken and he trembles and fears. And hence he has put it so as thoroughly to shame them, I have bestowed labor upon you, saying, as it were, make not vain the labors which have cost me sweat and pain. By saying I fear, and subjoining the word lest, he both inspires alarm, and encourages good hope. He says not I have labored in vain, but lest, which is as much as to say, the wreck has not happened, but I see the storm big with it; so I am in fear, yet not in despair; you have the power to set all right, and to return into your former calm. Then, as it were stretching out a hand to them thus tempest-tost, he brings himself into the midst, saying,

Ver. 12. I beseech you, brethren, be as I am; for I am as you are.

This is addressed to his Jewish disciples, and he brings his own example forward, to induce them thereby to abandon their old customs. Though you had none other for a pattern, he says, to look at me only would have sufficed for such a change, and for your taking courage. Therefore gaze on me; I too was once in your state of mind, especially so; I had a burning zeal for the Law; yet afterwards I feared not to abandon the Law, to withdraw from that rule of life. And this you know full well how obstinately I clung hold of Judaism, and how with yet greater force I let it go. He does well to place this last in order: for most men, though they are given a thousand reasons, and those just ones, are more readily influenced by that which

is like their own case, and more firmly hold to that which they see done by others.

Ver. 12. You did me no wrong.

Observe how he again addresses them by a title of honor, which was a reminder moreover of the doctrine of grace. Having chid them seriously, and brought things together from all quarters, and shown their violations of the Law, and hit them on many sides, he gives in and conciliates them speaking more tenderly. For as to do nothing but conciliate causes negligence, so to be constantly talked at with sharpness sours a man; so that it is proper to observe due proportion everywhere. See then how he excuses to them what he has said, and shows that it proceeded not simply because he did not like them, but from anxiety. After giving them a deep cut, he pours in this encouragement like oil; and, showing that his words were not words of hate or enmity, he reminds them of the love which they had evinced toward him, mixing his self-vindication with praises. Therefore he says, you did me no wrong.

Ver. 13, 14. But you know that because of an infirmity of the flesh I preached the Gospel unto you the first time. And that which was a temptation in my flesh you despised not, nor rejected.

Not to have injured one is indeed no great thing, for no man whatever would choose to hurt wantonly and without object to annoy another who had never injured him. But for you, not only have you not injured me, but you have shown me great and inexpressible kindness, and it is impossible that one who has been treated with such attention should speak thus from any malevolent motive. My language then cannot be caused by ill-will; it follows, that it proceeds from affection and solicitude. You did me no wrong; you know that because of an infirmity of the flesh I preached the Gospel unto you. What can be gentler than this holy soul, what sweeter, or more affectionate! And the words he had already used, arose not from an unreasoning anger, nor from a passionate emotion, but from much solicitude. And why do I say, you have not injured me? Rather have you evinced a great and sincere regard for me. For you know, he says, that because of an infirmity of the flesh I preached the Gospel unto you; and that which was a temptation to you in my flesh you despised not, nor rejected. What does he mean? While I preached to you, I was driven about, I was scourged, I suffered a thousand deaths, yet you thought no scorn of me; for this is meant by that which was a temptation to you in my flesh you despised not, nor rejected. Observe his spiritual skill; in the midst of his self-vindication, he again appeals to their feelings by showing what he had suffered for their sakes. This however, says he, did not at all offend you, nor did you reject me on account of my sufferings and persecutions; or, as he now calls them, his infirmity and temptation.

Ver. 14. But you received me as an Angel of God.

Was it not then absurd in them to receive him as an Angel of God, when he was persecuted and driven about, and then not to receive him when pressing on them what was fitting?

Ver. 15, 16. Where then is that gratulation of yourselves? For I bear you witness, that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes, and given them to me. So then am I become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?

Here he shows perplexity and amazement, and desires to learn of themselves the reason of their change. Who, says he, has deceived you, and caused a difference in your disposition towards me? Are you not the same who attended and ministered to me, counting me more precious than your own eyes? What then has happened? Whence this dislike? Whence this suspicion? Is it because I have told you the truth? You ought on this very account to pay me increased honor and attention; instead of which I have become your

enemy, because I tell you the truth,-- for I can find no other reason but this. Observe too what humbleness of mind appears in his defense of himself; he proves not by his conduct to them, but by theirs to him that his language could not possibly have proceeded from unkind feeling. For he says not; How is it supposable that one, who has been scourged and driven about, and ill-treated a thousand things for your sakes, should now have schemes against you? But he argues from what they had reason to boast of, saying, How can one who has been honored by you, and received as an Angel, repay you by conduct the very opposite?

Ver. 17. They zealously seek you in no good way; nay, they desire to shut you out that you may seek them.

It is a wholesome emulation which leads to an imitation of virtue, but an evil one, which seduces from virtue him who is in the right path. And this is the object of those persons, who would deprive you of perfect knowledge, and impart to you that which is mutilated and spurious, and this for no other purpose than that they may occupy the rank of teachers, and degrade you, who now stand higher than themselves, to the position of disciples. For this is the meaning of the words that you may seek them. But I, says he, desire the reverse, that you may become a model for them, and a pattern of a higher perfection: a thing which actually happened when I was present with you. Wherefore he adds,

Ver. 18. But it is good to be zealously sought in a good matter at all times, and not only when I am present with you.

Here he hints that his absence had been the cause of this, and that the true blessing was for disciples to hold right opinions not only in the presence but also in the absence of their master. But as they had not arrived at this point of perfection, he makes every effort to place them there.

Ver. 19. My little children, of whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you.

Observe his perplexity and perturbation, Brethren, I beseech you: My little children, of whom I am again in travail: He resembles a mother trembling for her children. Until Christ be formed in you. Behold his paternal tenderness, behold this despondency worthy of an Apostle. Observe what a wail he utters, far more piercing than of a woman in travail -- You have defaced the likeness, you have destroyed the kinship, you have changed the form, you need another regeneration and refashioning; nevertheless I call you children, abortions and monsters though you be. However, he does not express himself in this way, but spares them, unwilling to strike, and to inflict wound upon wound. Wise physicians do not cure those who have fallen into a long sickness all at once, but little by little, lest they should faint and die. And so is it with this blessed man; for these pangs were more severe in proportion as the force of his affection was stronger. And the offense was of no trivial kind. And as I have ever said and ever will say, even a slight fault mars the appearance and distorts the figure of the whole.

Ver. 20. Yea, I could wish to be present with you now, and to change my voice.

Observe his warmth, his inability to refrain himself, and to conceal these his feelings; such is the nature of love; nor is he satisfied with words, but desires to be present with them, and so, as he says, to change his voice, that is, to change to lamentation, to shed tears, to turn every thing into mourning. For he could not by letter show his tears or cries of grief, and therefore he ardently desires to be present with them.

Ver. 20. For I am perplexed about you. I know not, says he, what to say, or what to think. How is it, that you who by dangers, which you endured for the faith's sake, and by miracles, which you performed through faith, had ascended to the highest heaven, should suddenly be brought to such a depth of degradation as to be drawn aside to circumcision or sabbaths, and should rely wholly upon Judaizers? Hence in the beginning he says, I marvel that you are so quickly removing, and here, I am perplexed about you, as if he said, What am I to speak? What am I to utter? What am I to think? I am bitterly perplexed. And so he must needs weep, as the prophets do when in perplexity; for not only admonition but mourning also is a form in which solicitous attention is often manifested. And what he said in his speech to those at Miletus, By the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one...with tears, he says here also, and to change my voice. Acts 20:31 When we find ourselves overcome by perplexity and helplessness which come contrary to expectation, we are driven to tears; and so Paul admonished them sharply, and endeavored to shame them, then in turn soothed them, and lastly he wept. And this weeping is not only a reproof but a blandishment; it does not exasperate like reproof, nor relax like indulgent treatment, but is a mixed remedy, and of great efficacy in the way of exhortation. Having thus softened and powerfully engaged their hearts by his tears, he again advances to the contest, and lays down a larger proposition, proving that the Law itself was opposed to its being kept. Before, he produced the example of Abraham, but now (what is more cogent) he brings forward the Law itself enjoining them not to keep itself, but to leave off. So that, says he, you must abandon the Law, if you would obey it, for this is its own wish: this however he does not say expressly, but enforces it in another mode, mixing up with it an account of facts.

Ver. 21. Tell me, he says, you that desire to be under the Law, do you not hear the Law?

He says rightly, you that desire, for the matter was not one of a proper and orderly succession of things but of their own unseasonable contentiousness. It is the Book of Creation which he here calls the Law, which name he often gives to the whole Old Testament.

Ver. 22. For it is written, Genesis 15:16 that Abraham had two sons, one by the hand-maid and the other by the freewoman.

He returns again to Abraham, not in the way of repetition, but, inasmuch as the Patriarch's fame was great among the Jews, to show that the types had their origin from thence, and that present events were pictured aforesaid in him. Having previously shown that the Galatians were sons of Abraham, now, in that the Patriarch's sons were not of equal dignity, one being by a bondwoman, the other by a free-woman, he shows that they were not only his sons, but sons in the same sense as he that was freeborn and noble. Such is the power of Faith.

Ver. 23. Howbeit the son by the handmaid is born after the flesh; but the son by the freewoman is born through promise.

What is the meaning of after the flesh? Having said that Faith united us to Abraham, and it having seemed incredible to his hearers, that those who were not begotten by Abraham should be called his sons, he proves that this paradox had actually happened long ago; for that Isaac, born not according to the order of nature, nor the law of marriage, nor the power of the flesh, was yet truly his own son. He was the issue of bodies that were dead, and of a womb that was dead; his conception was not by the flesh, nor his birth by the seed, for the womb was dead both through age and barrenness, but the Word of God fashioned Him. Not so in the case of the bondman; He came by virtue of the laws of nature, and after the manner of

marriage. Nevertheless, he that was not according to the flesh was more honorable than he that was born after the flesh. Therefore let it not disturb you that you are not born after the flesh; for from the very reason that you are not so born, are you most of all Abraham's kindred. The being born after the flesh renders one not more honorable, but less so, for a birth not after the flesh is more marvellous and more spiritual. And this is plain from the case of those who were born of old time; Ishmael, for instance, who was born according to the flesh, was not only a bondman, but was cast out of his father's house; but Isaac, who was born according to the promise, being a true son and free, was lord of all.

Ver. 24. Which things contain an allegory.

Contrary to usage, he calls a type an allegory; his meaning is as follows; this history not only declares that which appears on the face of it, but announces somewhat farther, whence it is called an allegory. And what has it announced? No less than all the things now present.

Ver. 24. For these women, he says, are two covenants; one from mount Sinai, bearing children unto bondage, which is Hagar.

These: who? The mothers of those children, Sarah and Hagar; and what are they? Two covenants, two laws. As the names of the women were given in the history, he abides by this designation of the two races, showing how much follows from the very names. How from the names?

Ver. 25. Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia:

The bond-woman was called Hagar, and Hagar is the word for Mount Sinai in the language of that country. So that it is necessary that all who are born of the Old Covenant should be bondmen, for that mountain where the Old Covenant was delivered has a name in common with the bondwoman. And it includes Jerusalem, for this is the meaning of,

Ver. 25. And answers to Jerusalem that now is.

That is, it borders on, and is contiguous to it.

Ver. 25. For she is in bondage with her children.

What follows from hence? Not only that she was in bondage and brought forth bondmen, but that this Covenant is so too, whereof the bondwoman was a type. For Jerusalem is adjacent to the mountain of the same name with the bondwoman, and in this mountain the Covenant was delivered. Now where is the type of Sarah?

Ver. 26. But Jerusalem that is above is free.

Those therefore, who are born of her are not bondmen. Thus the type of the Jerusalem below was Hagar, as is plain from the mountain being so called; but of that which is above is the Church. Nevertheless he is not content with these types, but adds the testimony of Isaiah to what he has spoken. Having said that Jerusalem which is above is our Mother, and having given that name to the Church, he cites the suffrage of the Prophet in his favor,

Ver. 27. Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not, break forth and cry, you that travailest not, for more are the children of the desolate than of her which has the husband. Isaiah 54:1

Who is this who before was barren, and desolate? Clearly it is the Church of the Gentiles, that was before deprived of the knowledge of God? Who, she which has the husband? plainly the Synagogue. Yet the barren woman surpassed her in the number of her children, for the other embraces one nation, but the children of the Church have filled the country of the Greeks and of the Barbarians, the earth and sea, the whole habitable world. Observe how Sarah by acts, and the Prophet by words, have described the events about to befall us. Observe too, that he whom Isaiah called barren, Paul has proved to have many children, which also happened typically in the case of Sarah. For she too, although barren, became the mother of a numerous progeny. This however does not suffice Paul, but he carefully follows out the mode whereby the barren woman became a mother, that in this particular likewise the type might harmonize with the truth. Wherefore he adds

Ver. 28. Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise.

It is not merely that the Church was barren like Sarah, or became a mother of many children like her, but she bore them in the way Sarah did. As it was not nature but the promise of God which rendered Sarah a mother, [for the word of God which said, At the time appointed I will return unto you, and Sarah shall have a son, Genesis 18:14 this entered into the womb and formed the babe,] so also in our regeneration it is not nature, but the Words of God spoken by the Priest, (the faithful know them,) which in the Bath of water as in a sort of womb, form and regenerate him who is baptized.

Wherefore if we are sons of the barren woman, then are we free. But what kind of freedom, it might be objected, is this, when the Jews seize and scourge the believers, and those who have this pretence of liberty are persecuted? For these things then occurred, in the persecution of the faithful. Neither let this disturb you, he replies, this also is anticipated in the type, for Isaac, who was free, was persecuted by Ishmael the bondman. Wherefore he adds,

Ver. 29, 30. But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now. Howbeit what says the Scripture? Genesis 21:10 Cast out the handmaid and her son: for the son of the handmaid shall not inherit with the son of the freewoman.

What! Does all this consolation consist in showing that freemen are persecuted by bond-men? By no means, he says, I do not stop here, listen to what follows, and then, if you be not pusillanimous under persecution, you will be sufficiently comforted. And what is it that follows? Cast out the son of the handmaid, for he shall not inherit with the son of the freewoman. Behold the reward of tyranny for a season, and of recklessness out of season! The son is cast out of his father's house, and becomes, together with his mother, an exile and a wanderer. And consider too the wisdom of the remark; for he says not that he was cast forth merely because he persecuted, but that he should not be heir. For this punishment was not exacted from him on account of his temporary persecution, (for that would have been of little moment, and nothing to the point,) but he was not suffered to participate in the inheritance provided for the son. And this proves that, putting the persecution aside, this very thing had been typified from the beginning, and did not originate in the persecution, but in the purpose of God. Nor does he say, the son of Abraham shall not be heir, but, the son of the handmaid, distinguishing him by his inferior descent. Now Sarah was barren, and so is the Gentile Church; observe how the type is preserved in every particular, as the former, through all the by-gone years, conceived not, and in extreme old age became a mother, so the latter, when the fullness of time has come, brings forth. And this the prophets have proclaimed, saying, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, you that travailest not; for more are the children of the desolate than of her which has the husband. And hereby they intend the Church; for she knew not God,

but as soon as she knew Him, she surpassed the fruitful synagogue.

Ver. 31. Wherefore, brethren, we are not children of a handmaid but of the freewoman.

He turns and discusses this on all sides, desiring to prove that what had taken place was no novelty, but had been before typified many ages ago. How then can it be otherwise than absurd for those who had been set apart so long and who had obtained freedom, willingly to subject themselves to the yoke of bondage?

Next he states another inducement to them to abide in his doctrine.

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