

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON FIFTY-NINE)

“BECOME AS I AM”

GALATIANS 4:8-16

(ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION)

8 Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.

9 But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?

10 You observe days and months and seasons and years!

11 I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

12 Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong.

13 You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first,

14 and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.

15 What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me.

16 Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?

In previous Lessons we have stated that in verse **8**, Paul begins his appeal to the Galatian believers to forsake legalism and return to a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. In verse **11**, he makes one of the most poignant expressions in the Bible: *“I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.”* As we noted in our last Lesson, the reformer **Martin Luther** said of this verse,

“These words of Paul breathe tears.”

Paul had brought the Gospel of the grace of God to these people and they had made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ. He had also taught them that their sanctification could only be accomplished by the same grace that had saved them. It was the same Holy Spirit who had regenerated them Who would empower them to live daily under grace and not law. It grieved him to see these Gentile Christians, who had seemingly been set free from their slavery to the *“weak and worthless elementary principles of the world,”* being enslaved all over again.

The construction of this verse in the Greek gives the impression that the fear that Paul expresses about the future of the Galatian believers is one that may very well be realized. The words *“I fear”* are the translation of the Greek word **phobeó**: (**fob-eh’-o**), from which our English word “phobia” is derived. Clearly Paul fears that the worst has happened. He knows that the Galatians were observing “religious times” and his fear is that his labour among them would be for nothing, which indeed would be the case if they continued in their legalistic observance of the Mosaic Law.

In verses **12-20**, Paul continues his appeal to the Galatian believers. He appeals to them in a very touching way, reminding them of their enthusiastic reception of him and the Gospel which he preached, and informing them of his longing to be with them, in order that he might speak to them personally. His expressions in this passage are some of the most personal and tender in any of his letters.

Commenting on this passage, **Warren Wiersbe** writes the following:

"Paul was a wonderful spiritual father, he knew just how to balance rebuke with love. Now he turns from 'spanking' to 'embracing' as he reminds the believers of their love for him and his love for them. At one point they were willing to sacrifice anything for Paul, so great was their love; but now he had become their enemy. The Judaizers had come in and stolen their affection."

John Stott writes,

"In **Galatians 1-3** we have been listening to Paul the apostle, Paul the theologian, Paul the defender of the faith; but now we are hearing Paul the man, Paul the pastor, Paul the passionate lover of souls."

In verse **12** Paul writes, "*Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong.*" In this verse, Paul exhorts the Galatian believers to free themselves from bondage to the Mosaic Law as he himself has done. He appeals to them to do this because he, who had possessed all the advantages of the Law, had foregone those advantages and had placed himself on the same level in relation to the Law as the Gentiles. He had given up all the time-honoured Jewish customs and traditions that had been so dear to him in order to become like a Gentile. He was living like a Gentile so that he might preach the Gospel effectively to the Gentiles. He pleads with them not to abandon him and the Gospel that he preaches because he has abandoned all for them.

The best explanation as to what Paul means by the phrase, "*Become as I am,*" is to be found in chapter **2**, verses **17-21**. The **New Living Translation** renders the verses as follows:

17 But suppose we seek to be made right with God through faith in Christ and then we are found guilty because we have abandoned the law. Would that mean Christ has led us into sin? Absolutely not!

18 Rather, I am a sinner if I rebuild the old system of law I already tore down.

19 For when I tried to keep the law, it condemned me. So I died to the law—I stopped trying to meet all its requirements—so that I might live for God.

20 My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

21 I do not treat the grace of God as meaningless. For if keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die.

The **Message** translates the passage in the following manner:

17 Have some of you noticed that we are not yet perfect? (No great surprise, right?) And are you ready to make the accusation that since people like me, who go through Christ in order to get things right with God, aren't perfectly virtuous, Christ must therefore be an accessory to sin? The accusation is frivolous.

18 If I was "trying to be good," I would be rebuilding the same old barn that I tore down. I would be acting as a charlatan.

19 What actually took place is this: I tried keeping rules and working my head off to please God, and it didn't work. So I quit being a "law man" so that I could be God's man.

20 Christ's life showed me how, and enabled me to do it. I identified myself completely with him. Indeed, I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central. It is no longer important that I appear righteous before you or have your good opinion, and I am no longer driven to impress God. Christ lives in me. The life you see me living is not "mine," but it is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

21 I am not going to go back on that. Is it not clear to you that to go back to that old rule-keeping, peer-pleasing religion would be an abandonment of everything personal and free in my relationship with God? I refuse to do that, to repudiate God's grace. If a living relationship with God could come by rule-keeping, then Christ died unnecessarily.

"Become as I am, for I also have become as you are," says Paul. The Galatian believers were in danger of being brought into bondage under the Law by the Judaizers, so Paul reminds them that he had died to the Law and that they would have to follow his example if they were to successfully live the Christian life.

In a broader sense, Paul is presenting himself as a model of Christian faith and life. **John Stott** recognizes this. He writes,

"All Christians should be able to say something like this, especially to unbelievers, namely that we are so satisfied with Jesus Christ, with His freedom, joy and salvation, that we want other people to become like us."

James Montgomery Boice explains that Paul became like the Galatians in order to win them to Christ. He writes,

"This is a principle of great importance for all who are trying to win other people for Christ. Our goal must be to make them like us, while the means to that end is to make ourselves like them. Witnessing involves doctrine, but it also involves the most personal involvement of the witness with those to whom he or she is witnessing."

In **1 Corinthians 9:19-23**, Paul emphasizes the personal involvement of the witness with those to whom he or she is witnessing:

19 For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.

20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law.

21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.

22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.

23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

I love how the **Message** translates this passage:

19 Even though I am free of the demands and expectations of everyone, I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people:

20 religious, nonreligious,

21 meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists,

22 the defeated, the demoralized — whoever. I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ — but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life.

23 I did all this because of the Message. I didn't just want to talk about it; I wanted to be in on it!

What does Paul mean by the phrase “*You did me no wrong*” in **Galatians 4:12**? The phrase is explained in verses **13-15**, where he reminds them of their exemplary behaviour toward him. Not only had they done him no wrong, but they had received him openly and lovingly

when he was in extremely adverse personal circumstances. He was shocked that they were rejecting him now after the way they had accepted them when he had first arrived among them.

In verse **13** he writes, “*You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first.*” In this verse, Paul reminds the Galatian believers of the fact that when he first came to Antioch, it was not his intention to evangelize that territory, but to go on to another place, and that it was a sudden attack of illness that made it imperative for him to stay there. It was because of his illness, that he had preached the Gospel to them.

It is not possible for us to know for certain what bodily ailment Paul was speaking of in this verse, however the phrase, “*You know*” indicates that his readers understood what ailment Paul was referring to.

Warren Wiersbe makes the following helpful comments in respect of this matter:

“Bible students wish Paul had been more explicit here, because we are not sure just what events he is talking about. When Paul had originally visited them, he was suffering from some physical affliction. If, as noted in [**Galatians 1**], Paul wrote this letter to the churches of South Galatia, then he is referring to his first missionary journey, recorded in **Acts 13-14**. Apparently Paul had not intended to visit these cities, but was forced to do so because of some bodily infirmity. We can only speculate as to what this was. Some have suggested malaria; others, an affliction of the eyes (see **Galatians 4:15**). Whatever it was, it must have made Paul somewhat repulsive in appearance, because he commends the Galatians for the way they received him in spite of the way he looked. To them, he was an angel of God. It is a wonderful thing when people accept God's servants, not because of their outward appearance, but because they represent the Lord and bring His message.”

Kenneth Wuest explains that,

"Paul's illness...occurred under the observation of the Galatians who watched its progress, were familiar with its repulsive symptoms, and showed tender sympathy toward the sufferer. This fact may help us to understand the words, '*Ye had done me no wrong.*' The Galatians might easily have spurned Paul and refused his fellowship. There he was, a Jew, and a stranger to them, afflicted with an illness that normally aroused disgust and loathing by reason of its repulsive nature. But instead of doing Paul the wrong of rejecting him, they welcomed him with open arms, and his gospel message with open hearts..."

Paul mentions the fact in verse **15** that if it had been possible, the Galatians would have plucked out their eyes and would have given them to him. The inference should be clear that he needed a new pair of eyes, and that therefore his illness was an eye affliction. His words in [chapter] **6:1**, "*Ye see with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand,*" confirm this, the large Greek letters being necessary because of his impaired vision. A further confirmation of this is found in the fact that in the lowlands of Pamphylia, a region through which Paul had just passed on his way to Pisidian Antioch, an oriental eye disease called ophthalmia was prevalent."

Brothers and sisters, God delights in displaying His strength in and through the weakness of His servants. In **2 Corinthians 12:7-10**, we read the following:

7 So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.

9 But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Paul’s sickness and suffering were not surprising to him. In fact, it is likely that this was what he expected based on the Lord’s words to Ananias concerning him recorded in **Acts 9:16**: “*For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.*”

In verse **14**, he writes, “*and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.*” Paul is reminding the Galatians that they did not yield to the temptation to despise him because of his physical condition.

J Vernon McGee remarks that,

“Probably Paul’s thorn in the flesh was some sort of eye trouble, and it evidently made him very unattractive. I cannot conceive of them wanting to pluck out their eyes and give them to Paul if what he really needed was another leg. Apparently Paul had an eye disease which is common in that land and is characterized by excessive pus that runs out of the eyes. You can well understand how unattractive that would be to look at while he was ministering to them.”

The Greek word translated “*trial*” describes first the idea of putting to the test and then refers to the test or pressure that comes in order to discover a person’s nature or the quality of something. Paul’s affliction was a “trial” for the Galatians, in that its nature was such that a normal reaction to it would be in the form of disgust and loathing, which would be followed by the rejection of the one so afflicted. They would have been tempted to reject Paul’s message as not being a divine one, for surely a divine message would be accompanied by the strength rather

than the weakness of the messenger. There was something in the physical appearance of the apostle that tempted the Galatians to reject him and his message. It would have been very tempting for them to see Paul's dreadful affliction as the punishment of God or the gods for great wrongdoing. But instead of rejecting him, they received him "*an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.*"

It is possible that this is a reference to the healing of the lame man at Lystra, recorded in **Acts 14:8-18**. In their excitement at this miraculous healing, the Lycaonians thought that Barnabas was Zeus, the chief of the Greek gods, and that Paul was Hermes, the messenger and the interpreter of the gods. Paul looks back to the day when these Galatians had received him as a messenger of the gods, even as the son of God.

It is more probable however, that they accepted him as they would an angelic messenger from God. When Paul spoke it was as if the Lord Himself were speaking. As Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 5:20**, "*Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*"

Our Lord Himself had prophesied that His messengers would be received as if He Himself had come. In **John 13:20** he says, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.*"

Brothers and sisters, do we boast about our strengths or about our weaknesses? Let us listen to Paul as he answers that question as it relates to himself:

22 Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I.

23 Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death.

24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.

25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea;

26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers;

27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

28 And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

30 If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.
(1 Corinthians 11:22-30)