

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON SIXTY-TWO)

“HAS CHRIST BEEN FORMED IN US?”

GALATIANS 4:19-20

(ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION)

19 my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!

20 I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

In previous Lessons, we have stated that in verses **12-20** of chapter **4**, Paul implores the Galatian believers to forsake legalism and return to a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. In this passage, he appeals to them in a very affecting 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. We noted that his expressions in this passage are some of the most personal and tender in any of his letters.

In verse **19**, Paul addresses his beloved Galatian converts with one of the most poignant expressions in the Bible: *“My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!”*

The **New Living Translation** renders the verse as follows: *“Oh, my dear children! I feel as if I’m going through labor pains for you again, and they will continue until Christ is fully developed in your lives.”*

The expression, *“little children,”* is a translation of the Greek word

teknon: (**tek'-non**), which refers to a child, either male or female, as viewed in relation to his or her parents or family. Paul refers to them as “*My little children.*” It is an expression that is only used here in Paul’s letters. He refers to them in this way because the majority of them were indeed his “spiritual” children for he had “given birth to them,” so to speak, through the preaching of the Gospel. By addressing the Galatian believers so personally and so tenderly, Paul would no doubt have made them more disposed to bear his words of reproof. His expression conveyed the idea that he, in contrast to them, was not one thing when he was among them and another thing when absent from them. They had left their “first love” for him, but he still loved them with the same sincerity and passion that he had demonstrated when he was among them. They were no longer willing to “gouge out their eyes” and give them to him, but he still considered them his “dear children.”

In 1 Thessalonians 2:5-8, Paul used a similar figure of speech in addressing the believers in Thessalonica:

5 For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness.

6 Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ.

7 But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.

8 So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.

Paul tells the Galatians that he is “*again in the anguish of childbirth*” for them. The word “*again,*” indicates that he had experienced labour pains with them before, presumably when he first proclaimed the Gospel to them. Because of what Paul has learned about the adverse effects of the pernicious, legalistic teaching of the Judaizers on his “dear children” in

Galatia, he is for the second time distressed for them with the same anguish that he experienced in his efforts at their initial conversion. The first time Paul was in travail for their deliverance from slavery to idolatry, and now he is in travail for them to be delivered from the slavery of legalism.

The phrase, “*in the anguish of childbirth,*” is the translation of a Greek word which means, “to feel the pains of childbirth, to travail.” It refers to the birth pains that a mother suffers when she is giving birth to her child. What Paul is indicating here by using this maternal metaphor to describe the experience of a second bout of labour pains, is that he loves the Galatian believers to such an extent that he is willing to go through the incredibly painful process of childbirth again for their sakes!

The English theologian **W. E. Vine**, comments as follows in respect of this verse:

“There is a suggestion of reproach in his words, as though he would ask them whether they had ever heard of a mother enduring the birth pangs twice for her children. There is no thought here of a second regeneration necessitated by their defection; for one reason because the apostle does not charge them with having actually turned away from the true gospel, but only with being in danger of doing so.”

John MacArthur puts the following words in Paul’s mouth:

“You have already experienced the new birth, but now you are acting as if you need to be spiritually born all over again. You make me feel like a mother who has to deliver the same baby twice.”

Paul feels as if he is going through labour pains for the Galatian believers all over again, and he will continue to do so until “*Christ is formed*” or fully developed in them. The word “*formed*” is a translation of the Greek word **morphoó: (mor-fo’-o)**, which refers to the act of giving outward expression of one’s inner nature. It does not refer to that which is outward and transient, but to that which is inward and real. The

word describes the taking on of a form that embodies a particular inner essence. We sometimes use the word “form” in that way in English. For example, we speak of a batsman in cricket as being “in excellent form.” We mean by that, that the outward expression which the batsman is demonstrating of his inner ability to bat, is excellent.

In this verse, Paul is referring to the outward expression of the Lord Jesus in the lives of the Galatian believers. These Galatians were truly saved. The Lord Jesus was resident in their hearts. But the beauty of Jesus was not being manifested in their lives. The word “*again*” indicates that at one time He was clearly and abundantly evident in their experience, but sadly, this was no longer the case by the time Paul wrote this letter to them. The reason for this is found in the fact that the Judaizers in placing the Galatian believers under law, had caused them to substitute self-effort instead of a dependence upon the Holy Spirit for the production of a Christ-like life in and through them.

Kenneth Wuest, explains that the phrase, “*be formed*” is in a construction in the Greek which tells us that the Lord Jesus dwells in the heart of a believer in a **passive** way, and thus He does not express Himself through the believer. He has given that ministry over to the Holy Spirit. In **John 16:14**, He said, referring to the Spirit, “*He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.*” It is evident that the Holy Spirit was not being recognized and depended upon by the Galatian believers. Consequently, He was not able to glorify the Lord Jesus to them and through them in any meaningful way. The legalistic message of the Judaizers was wreaking havoc in the churches of Galatia!

Commenting on the phrase, “*until Christ is formed in you,*” **Donald Campbell** writes,

“This expression describes the Christian life as a kind of reincarnation of Christ in a believer’s life. This is in fact God’s ideal and purpose-for Christ to live His life in and then through each believer.”

Paul speaks of this “reincarnation of Christ in a believer’s life” in **Galatians 2:19-21**:

19 For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God.

20 I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

21 I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

The words, “*until Christ is formed in you,*” speaks of progressive sanctification or growth in Christ-likeness. Christlikeness is the goal of the believer’s life. Indeed, every believer has been predestined to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, according to **Romans 8:29**: “*For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*” God the Father sent His Son to earth not only to die that we might be saved, but also to live as the example for those of us who are saved.

Brothers and sisters, in order for the **morphé** (form), or the essential nature of Christ, to be **morphoó** (formed) in us, Jesus Christ must not only be present in our lives, but He must also increasingly “settle down and feel at home” in our lives. This process of maturity into Christ-likeness is not a mere outward conformity to a set of rules or a code of conduct, but a progressive inward transformation of our character. This inward transformation is effected by the Holy Spirit Whose responsibility it is to put sin out of the life of a believer and to produce His fruit in his or her life. The more a believer comes under the lordship of Jesus Christ and as a result, is led by the Spirit, the greater that inward transformation will be.

In **verse 20**, Paul expresses the thought that a personal visit might help to resolve the mental and emotional trauma that he was experiencing on

account of the Galatians' spiritual crisis. He writes, "*I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.*" Paul is realizing how difficult it is to communicate his true feelings in writing to the Galatian believers instead of speaking with them face-to-face. If he were physically present, his words would be accompanied with eye contact, body language, and tone of voice. He could, so to speak, put his heart into his voice.

Thomas Schreiner remarks that,

"The letter to the *Galatians* cannot replace a face-to-face encounter in which Paul can engage the *Galatians* in conversation. If he were present with them, he could respond in the dynamics of everyday life to each issue they raise. Since he is absent from them, however, he must resort to writing, not knowing how they will react."

Wuest explains that the words, "*change my tone,*" could mean either or both of two things. He writes,

"First, they could mean that the apostle regretted the severity of his language on the occasion of his second visit to the *Galatian* churches at which time he had warned them against the Judaizers, and that he desired to be with them personally in order that he might talk to them in a more tender and affectionate manner, however, still telling them the truth...

Second, the words "to change my voice," were regularly used of the act of changing to some other means of expression. Paul longs to go to them and speak personally rather than send a message through the medium of writing...But the apostle found it impossible to go to them at that time, and thus in the providence of God, the Church has the letter to the *Galatians*, and has found it a tower of strength and a bulwark against the heresy which teaches that salvation is appropriated by faith plus works.

Both of these interpretations could be true, and could be included in what Paul meant by these words. He desired to be with the Galatians personally so that he might speak to them face to face instead of writing a letter, and in speaking to them, change his tone from one of severity to one of gentleness."

Paul tells the Galatian believers that he is "*perplexed*" about them. The Greek word translated "*perplexed*" means, "to be without resources, to be in straits, to be left wanting, to be embarrassed, to be in doubt, not to know which way to turn." Paul is saying basically that he is at the limits of his mental resources. He is at his "wits' end." This idiom means to be in a state of distress because one has no more patience or mental stamina, often after having dealt with some kind of protracted problem or difficult situation. That was Paul's position with regard to his beloved Galatian converts.

Wuest says that,

"The verb is in the **middle voice**, which fact speaks of the inward distress of a mind tossed to and fro by conflicting doubts and fears. The Greek has it, 'I am perplexed in you.' Paul's perplexity is conceived as being in the Galatians. He says in effect, 'I am puzzled how to deal with you, how to find an entrance into your hearts.'"

Brothers and sisters, this passage and particularly this verse, clearly indicates that even though Paul was an Apostle, he was not exempt from both the external and internal trials that all believers in Christ have to deal with. It is important for us to understand and appreciate that the life of a believer is a walk of faith. In **2 Corinthians 5:7**, Paul writes, "*for we walk by faith, not by sight.*"

The person who "walks by faith," knows that his or her end is sure. He or she knows that "*for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose*" (**Romans 8:28**). He or she is sure that the One who began a good work in him or

her will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (**Philippians 1:8**). But he or she does not know the steps that transitions him or her from one situation to the next.

We must also bear in mind that Paul did not have information concerning the future of any particular believer, or of any particular church. And so, there was always room for fear of the worst to motivate him to work hard to prevent spiritual damage to any believer or church, and there was always room for hope of the best to give him confidence that his intervention would not be in vain.

Paul was in a state of perplexity because of how attracted the Galatian believers were to the Judaizers and the Mosaic Law. They had heard the truth of the Gospel and they had seemed to genuinely believe it, and yet they were falling so quickly for a lie! Let us recall how he had opened this letter. In chapter 1 and verses 6-7 he writes,

6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—

7 not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

Commenting on this verse, **Charles Swindoll**, writes the following:

"As a pastor, what I find so disturbing about Paul's letter to the Galatians is not that its readers were stuck in a works mentality—most people in the world fit that description—but that although the Galatians had once embraced the message of grace, they decided to shift back to the message of works!"

Paul's purpose in writing this letter was to persuade the Galatian believers to cling to their liberty in Christ since they were born spiritually to freedom. He wanted them to reject the yoke of legalistic slavery that the Judaizers were trying to force on them. As we indicated in an earlier Lesson, Paul may have been unsure as to the true spiritual

status of the Galatians. Their defection from the truth had left him with doubts. Were they really possessors of faith or had they merely made a profession of faith? He is torn between wanting to believe in their genuine faith and being skeptical of their allegiance to the false teaching of the legalists. Their relapse into legalism confused him. He was at a loss to conceive of an adequate reason for them departing from the liberating message of grace in order to embrace a message that was having the effect of bringing them into bondage again. He does not know what to think of the Galatians. How could he have taught the Gospel of grace so clearly, only for them to turn away from it so quickly?

The context of this verse within the broader letter to the Galatians is essential for understanding its significance. In the preceding verses, Paul recounts his previous relationship with the Galatian believers and his initial proclamation of the Gospel to them. He laments the influence of the Judaizers who have misled the Galatians and warns them of the consequences of turning away from the true Gospel. The intensity of his emotions and the depth of his concern for the spiritual well-being of the Galatians are evident throughout the letter, and this verse summarizes his impassioned plea for the restoration of their faith.

We will conclude this evening with the following quotation from “**Bible Art**” in respect of this verse:

“One of the key themes that can be drawn from this verse is the importance of genuine and steadfast faith. Paul's concern for the Galatians stems from his deep commitment to the truth of the gospel and his desire to see the believers remain firmly rooted in it. Throughout the letter to the Galatians, Paul emphasizes the need for faith in Christ alone for salvation, and he condemns any deviation from this central truth. This verse serves as a reminder of the...constant need for vigilance in guarding against false teachings and spiritual complacency.”