

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON FIFTY-EIGHT)

“PAUL’S PHOBIA”

GALATIANS 4:8-11

(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.

In previous Lessons we have noted 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 this verse, he reminds them that before they were saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, they were enslaved to gods who were not really gods at all. They had no existence in the nature of things, but only in the corrupt imaginations of those who worshipped them.

In verse **9**, Paul writes, “*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?*”

The phrase, “*you have come to know God,*” is a reference to salvation from a **human** perspective, while the phrase “*to be known by God,*” is a reference to salvation from **God’s** perspective. Paul places the emphasis on God knowing us rather than on us knowing God. If God had not first chosen and known us, we could never have chosen and known Him!

The Greek word translated “*know*” and “*known*” is **ginóskó: (ghin-
oce’-ko)**, which means, “to learn to know, come to know, get a knowledge of; to become known.” The word refers to experiential knowledge, not merely to the accumulation of known facts. The idea is of knowledge that is experiential, personal and intimate. God’s knowledge of the Galatian believers was experiential, personal and intimate, and the same was true of their knowledge of God.

In light of this, Paul’s question is particularly poignant: “*How can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?*” The word “*how*” is the translation of a Greek word, which means, “how is it possible?” Paul was flabbergasted. It was very difficult for him to conceive of such a thing as a believer, having been rescued from abject slavery to demons in a pagan religion, returning to a human system of bondage.

Paul says that they were turning back again, “*to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world.*” When Paul speaks of these “*elementary principles*” as being “*weak and worthless,*” he is describing their absolute inability to accomplish and grant what the grace of God is able to accomplish and grant. They are “*weak*” because they have no power to rescue unsaved human beings from condemnation. They are “*worthless*” because they are unable to bestow any spiritual blessings, and as a consequence, they provide no help in conquering the evil desires that dwell in the heart of every human being.

Incredibly, Paul indicates that the Galatian believers **desired** to be enslaved again! He says to them, “*How can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?*” The Greek word translated “*want*” is

theló: (**eth-el'-o**), which means, “to be resolved or determined, to purpose: to desire, to wish: to like to do a thing, be fond of doing: to take delight, have pleasure.” **W.E. Vine**, explains that **theló**, does not simply express a desire, but a determined and constant exercise of the will. The word is in the **present tense**, indicating that the Galatians were continually desiring to be enslaved again! They were not being forced to go back into slavery. They were wilfully turning from truth to error. No wonder Paul was so bemused, outraged and saddened. He asks how they could turn back again and be in bondage to a view-point of justification by works that was as weak and worthless as the elements they had worshipped and been enslaved to before they were saved.

In verse **10**, Paul speaks of the way in which this turning by the Galatian believers from Christ and the Authentic Gospel, to “*the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world,*” was being manifested. He writes, “*You observe days and months and seasons and years!*” The Galatian believers were becoming religious ritualists again. The presence of the Judaizers in Galatia makes it likely that the “*days and months and seasons and years*” which the Galatians were observing, were those which the Mosaic Law required Israel to observe. This is made clear by Paul’s statement in verse **21**, where Paul asks, “*Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?*”

The “*days*” probably refer to the Sabbath days and to the feasts which were observed just for a day. The “*months*” refer to the monthly recurring events, or to the seventh month spoken of in **Numbers 29**. The reference also could have to do with the celebration of the appearance of the new moon mentioned in **Numbers 10:10** and **Numbers 28:11**. “*Seasons*” refer to the celebrations not limited to a single day, such as the Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles. “*Years*” is probably a reference to the year of jubilee or the Sabbatical year. The Galatian believers were exchanging a pagan religious calendar for a Jewish religious calendar!

The word “*observe*” is the translation of a Greek word which means, “to stand beside and watch; to watch assiduously, observe carefully; to keep scrupulously; to neglect nothing requisite to the religious observance of.” The word denotes careful, scrupulous observance, an intent watching, lest any of the prescribed days, months, seasons and years be overlooked. The Greek word is in the **present tense**, indicating that the Galatians were continually observing these Old Testament regulations assiduously, in order to ensure that they neglected nothing that was required. A merely legalistic or ritualistic system of religion always promotes meticulous attention to external observances.

Commenting on this verse **Warren Wiersbe** makes the following remarks:

“Does this mean that it is wrong for Christians to set aside one day a year to remember the birth of Christ? Or that a special observance of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost or the blessing of the harvest in autumn, is a sin?”

Not necessarily. If we observe special days like slaves, hoping to gain some spiritual merit, then we are sinning. But if in the observance, we express our liberty in Christ and let the Spirit enrich us with His grace, then the observance can be a spiritual blessing.

The New Testament makes it clear that Christians are not to legislate religious observances for each other (Romans 14:4-13). We are not to praise the man who celebrates the day, nor are we to condemn the man who does not celebrate. But if a man thinks he is saving his soul, or automatically growing in grace, because of a religious observance, then he is guilty of legalism.”

Paul did not object to these religious observances per se, for he himself observed them as a Jew. He objected to **Gentiles** observing them **as a means of salvation**. He would also have objected to **Jewish** Christians

doing so in order to be justified in the sight of God, or to earn merit points with God.

Paul was a former Pharisee and knew all about this. Earlier in chapter 1 and verses **13-14** he had written,

13 For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.

14 And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.

In **Philippians 3:5-6**, he writes the following concerning his pre-conversion religious experience:

5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;

6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Paul, as these passages clearly indicate, was well acquainted with the meticulous care with which the Pharisees kept all the appointed feasts and the other rituals of the Mosaic Law. It grieved him sorely to see these Gentile believers being drawn into the net of the Judaizers, and enslaved by the formal, lifeless, legalistic life-style that he now considered so “*weak and worthless.*”

As one commentator has observed,

“God had given Moses the law for Israel, and it was to identify them as His special people. And as His special people there were certain ways they had to live and act and eat, and even certain things that were forbidden like going into a Gentile home...**It wasn't the moral law. The moral law is simply a reflection of God's character, and that is everlasting and eternal...**When Christ came the law was done...its role

was over. Now there was neither Jew nor Gentile, but all are one in Christ. So God is not identifying a certain nation or nationality of people by external behaviors and ordinances and events. That was the shadow. That was the ABCs. That was elementary school. Now Christ has come, and we go from shadow to substance. From elementary school we graduate into the school of discipleship with Christ."

It is apparent from chapter 5 and verses 1-3, that the Galatian believers had not yet fully embraced the entire Mosaic Law, for they had not yet submitted to circumcision. Paul writes,

1 For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

*2 Look: I, Paul, say to you that **if you accept circumcision**, Christ will be of no advantage to you.*

3 I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.

Perhaps the Judaizers had cleverly refrained from presenting the more offensive requirements of the Mosaic Law to the Galatian believers and had only introduced to them the aspects that would appeal to their religiosity, like the celebration of feasts and the observation of other special days. Seeing that they had wholeheartedly embraced these, the Judaizers were now urging them to adopt circumcision and other more onerous aspects of the Law.

In verse 11, Paul writes, "*I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.*" 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 seemed to believe it. He had also taught them that their sanctification-their growing in Christ-likeness 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 been set free from their slavery to the “*weak and worthless elementary principles of the world,*” being ensnared by the Judaizers into slavery 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. In fact it appears as though he believes they have already been realized at least in part! Paul was not concerned so much about his own interests or his seemingly futile labours. He was fearful with respect to the spiritual welfare of his beloved Galatian converts. They were the objects of his anxiety.

The words “*I fear*” are the translation of the Greek word **phobeó**: (**fob-eh’-o**), from which our English word “phobia” is derived. The word means, “to terrify, frighten, to put to flight by terrifying (to scare away); to be struck with fear, to be seized with alarm.” 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.

The Greek word translated “*labour*” means, “to grow weary, tired, exhausted, (with toil or burdens or grief): to labor with wearisome effort, to toil.” The idea is of labouring to the point of exhaustion. The word is in the **perfect tense**, indicating the thorough work of evangelism that Paul had done in Galatia.

The word “*vain*” is the translation of a Greek word which means, “without success or effect, to no avail, to no purpose or in vain (having no real value or failing to achieve a desired result).”

Kenneth Wuest's Expanded Translation of the Greek New Testament, renders the verse as follows: *"I am afraid about you lest perhaps in vain I have labored to the point of exhaustion for you."*

John MacArthur states,

"How sad for such a faithful servant of the Lord to believe that all the life-threatening, sacrificial service he had given in behalf of the people of Galatia was worthless. All the travel, illness, loneliness, struggles, even the stoning he received in Lystra that left him for dead, was for nothing if they reverted to their old slavery. No wonder this is such an impassioned epistle. The thought of all that effort being void compelled Paul to write as he did."

Paul is saying in effect to the Galatian believers, "I fear that I have wasted my time among you. Maybe you were not genuinely converted after all. Maybe everything I taught you just went in one ear right and out the other ear. It never lodged; you never really received the truth. You never were changed by that truth."

Brothers and sisters, Paul expresses fear for those who profess to be believers, yet seek to find favour with God by legal observances. Even unsaved persons can observe, days and months and seasons and years. It gives some people intense satisfaction to feel there is something they can do in their own strength to win God's approval. If Paul could write in this manner to the Galatians, what would he write to professing believers today who are seeking to be justified and sanctified through own efforts?

In **Colossians 2:8-17**, Paul writes the following:

8 See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

9 For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,

10 and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

11 In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,

12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

13 And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,

14 by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

16 Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

17 These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

The false teachers in **Colossae** were passing judgment on the believers as to whether they were truly “spiritual” or not. They told the Colossians the lie that Jesus Christ was not enough but that they also needed to keep the Jewish ceremonial rituals as commanded in the Mosaic Law. These false teachers used non-Biblical criteria by which to judge the believers.

In order to counter the lies of these adversaries of the truth, Paul presents the truth about the believer’s position in Christ. He argued that since they had been delivered by Christ from the evils which surrounded them and had been freed from the observances of the law, they were not to allow anyone to sit in judgment of them, or claim the right to decide for

them in these matters. They were not responsible to human beings for their conduct, but to Christ “*who is the head of all rule and authority.*”

We will conclude this evening with the words of the “**Prince of Preachers,**” **C.S. Spurgeon:**

“Do not let anybody come in, and tell you that it is necessary for your salvation that you should abstain from this meat or that drink, that there is a merit in fasting for forty days in Lent, or that you cannot be saved without observing such and such a holy day. Your salvation is in Christ. Keep you to that, and add nothing to this one foundation which is once for all laid in him.

Do not put yourself under the bondage of any rules and regulations that may be made by men. If you choose to do anything, or to abstain from something else, because you judge it to be right and beneficial, do so. Christ is your only Ruler and Leader; and if he does not command anything, let it not signify to you who does command it...If you abstain from certain meats, because they have been offered to idols, and the consciences of others might be offended if you partook of them, do not act thus as though it would save you. Do not make yourself subject to the judgment of other men, for Christ is your Law-giver and Lord.”