

FROM SONSHIP TO SLAVERY
PART 3

TEXT: GALATIANS 4:8-11

February 27, 2011

INTRO/REVIEW:

To keep the Galatians from falling from sonship to slavery, Paul sets forth 3 aspects of the Galatians' relationship to God that he wants them to remember, thus showing the foolishness of turning back to the law.

I. PAUL REMINDS THE GALATIANS OF WHO THEY WERE: IGNORANT OF GOD, v. 8

II. PAUL REMINDS THE GALATIANS OF WHO THEY ARE: KNOWN BY GOD, v. 9A-B

Paul describes conversion here as knowing God, or better being known by God. A Christian is not just one who follows a set of rules but rather one who possesses a saving knowledge of God as his or her heavenly Father. It is from this new relationship that obedience flows.

However, Paul is quick to emphasize that this new saving knowledge of God cannot be attributed to the believer. A Christian comes to know God in this saving way because the Lord knew him first! To be known by God is to be visited by Him in Mercy. To be known by God is to be a recipient of grace. We know God because He first knew us! Ultimately, it is not that we know God but that He knew us and visited us in mercy.

Moreover, to be known by God is to be received by Him as a son. We know and love God as our Father because He first knew us as His son (i.e., He set His Fatherly love and affection upon us. Our whole salvation depends upon His knowing of us. It is in light of God's knowing us that Paul expresses his utter astonishment at the Galatians turning back to the law after their conversion (1:6 "astonished").

This leads us to Paul's final point.

LESSON:

III. PAUL WARNS THE GALATIANS OF WHO THEY MAY BE: CONDEMNED BY GOD. vv. 9C-11

A. PAUL'S QUESTION, v. 9C

Paul asks the Galatians, "How can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more" (v. 9c)?

The essence of Paul's message is here: Once you were slaves. Now you are sons. How then can you turn back and desire to be slaves again?

Notice carefully how Paul equates submitting oneself to the Mosaic Law with paganism. Essentially, Paul is saying that what the Judaizers are actually teaching is a form of paganism not Christianity!

This was a huge refutation of the Judaizers, which undoubtedly would have pierced them to the core.

Before their conversion, the Galatians were pagan idolaters (i.e., ignorant of God and thus enslaved to the "elementary principles" of the world, cf. 4:3). All religions, whether it be the worship of Zeus, astrology (such as the Galatians), Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, etc..., operate according to the elementary principles of the world, which is, "Do this and live."

Thus, the Galatians' desire to live under a "Do this and live" covenant was like living under the bondage of the pagan religions, which they were formerly enslaved to.

Simply put, legalism is paganism!

Paul describes the "elementary principles" as "weak and worthless." The "Do this and live" principle is "weak" because it is powerless to provide the redemption and adoption men need (4:5-6). Further, it is "worthless" because it is poverty-stricken (i.e., it cannot supply the spiritual riches and inheritance that God the Father has promised through faith in Christ, 4:7).

The Law, just like pagan religions, is "weak and worthless" for salvation (i.e., justification, redemption, adoption). Paul has already stated in Galatians 3:21 that the Law has no power to give life! The author of Hebrews in 7:18-19, writes, "¹⁸ For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness ¹⁹ (for the law made nothing perfect)..."

Because of the law's total inability for salvation (which was never its purpose!), Paul is astonished (1:6) and at a loss for words (4:20) as to why someone who has been delivered from one type enslaving idolatry (paganism) would desire to become enslaved to another (Judaism)!

Concerning being known by God, J.I. Packer writes,

What matters supremely, therefore, is not in the last analysis, the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it- the fact that He knows me. I am graven on the palms of His hands. I am never out of His mind. All my knowledge of Him depends on His sustained initiative in knowing me. I know Him because He first knew me, and continues to know me. He knows me as a friend, one who

loves me; and there is no moment when His eye is off me, or His attention distracted from me, and no moment...when His care falters (*Knowing God*, p. 42).

Why would anyone desire to return to weak and worthless idols in light of being known by the Living God in this way?! Why would anyone desire demonic bondage (idolatry, 1 Cor. 10:20) over the freedom of being known by God? Why would someone desire that which is weak and worthless over that which is effectual and invaluable? For, as we have seen from v. 8, whatever man places his trust in apart from the true knowledge of God that is what becomes his god and is what he becomes a slave to.

A son doesn't want to give up his inheritance and live in poverty! What was the evidence of their desire to turn back?

B. PAUL'S INDICTMENT, v. 10

Paul says, "You observe days and months and seasons and years" (v. 10)!

Their turning back is characterized by their desire (θέλετε, v. 9) to observe the religious festivals on the Mosaic calendar (e.g., weekly Sabbath observance, Passover, Pentecost, Feast of Tabernacles, the Year of Jubilee). Paul feared for the Galatians because they were beginning to observe certain religious festivals as a means of obtaining or maintaining their favorable standing with God.

The issue then is not so much religious observances (cf. Rom. 14:5-6) but rather the basis of one's justification before God. The danger of ceremonies is that it is possible to observe the ritual and miss the truth!

The temptation to substitute the knowledge of God for external religious practice (idolatry) runs deep in the fallen heart of man. For example, we see this today in our culture each year at Christmas and Easter.

Thousands of nominal "Christians" attend worship services at Christmas and Easter thinking their annual or semiannual "pilgrimage(s)" are sufficient to keep them in good standing with God. They think that the observance of this "religious ritual" is all that God requires (the principle of *ex opere operato*).

A slave then is characterized by the desire to substitute knowledge of God for external religious practice/forms of religion as the basis for justification before God. However, such a desire is wholly incompatible with one who is known by God (an adopted son).

The astonishing thing for Paul is that the Galatians "desired" (θέλετε, v. 9) to be slaves again. Paul was at a loss for words because the Galatians desired to exchange the saving knowledge of God for religious external observance.

John Stott writes,

Oh, the folly of these Galatians! We can certainly understand the language of the Prodigal Son, who came to his father and said ‘I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants’ or ‘slaves.’ But how can anyone be so foolish as to say: ‘You have made me your son; but I would rather be a slave’? ‘I do not desire it; I prefer slavery to sonship’. Yet that was the folly of the Galatians, under the influence of their false teachers (*Galatians*, p. 108).

A slave finds more pleasure in His works for Christ than in Christ’s works for him. In contrast, a son finds more pleasure in Christ’s works for him than in his works for Christ.

For example:

Do you find more assurance in God’s acceptance of you because of what you do rather than what Christ has done for you?

Do you find more comfort in the fact that when you got into an argument with your wife, you kept your cool and didn’t retaliate in anger? Or, do you find more comfort in trusting in the fact that Christ was never once guilty of unrighteous anger on your behalf?

The question is why would someone desire to trade being known by God for external religious practice?

The answer is self-justification.

The desire for religious external practice over a true knowledge of God (or better being known by God) is nothing more than idolatry/self-justification. Man, in his fallen condition, loves to be made much of (i.e., self-justification, cf. 4:17-18). And so the attraction to religious rituals runs deep in the heart of every man. Festivals, ceremony, symbolism, smells/bells, etc... appeal to the flesh.

It feeds the idolatrous desire of man’s heart which thinks, “Surely, there is something I can/must contribute.” The point of idolatry is to maintain one’s own autonomy over God (self-salvation, Frank Sinatra, “I did it my way.” Pull myself up by my own bootstraps mentality).

The desire for religious external ceremony over a saving knowledge of God demonstrates the depth of man’s depravity and fallen state. The Galatians’ desire to turn back to slavery recalls Israel’s desire to turn back to Egypt (cf. Ex. 14:10-12; 16:3; 17:3; Num. 14:2-4).

This is why the Galatians’ perplexing desires (as evidenced by their observance of the Mosaic calendar) evoked fear in Paul. And so, with a fearful heart, Paul issues a solemn warning in v. 11. He says, “I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.” At this point in the letter, Paul voices his greatest concern over the situation in Galatia.

C. PAUL'S WARNING, v. 11

Paul fears that all of the persecution and illness he suffered (cf. Acts 14) to bring the gospel to the Galatians would prove to be in vain. However, he was not fearful for himself but rather for the Galatians. Underneath his fear is something that is far more foreboding. What was it that caused such alarm in Paul?

The Galatians' actions (v. 10) raised doubts in Paul's mind about the outcome of their salvation. The underlying issue troubling Paul is his doubt over the Galatians' justification. He fears that the Galatians may actually be condemned by God (i.e., that they are not truly converted, (εἰκῆ, as though it had never happened/vain).

Throughout this letter, Paul has shown that if anyone turns from the gospel, the consequences are disastrous (e.g., Christ's death is rendered useless, 2:21; come under the curse of the Law, 1:8-9; 3:10; cut off from Christ, who is the only source of justification, 5:2-4). There is a gospel that justifies and there is a false gospel that condemns (1:8-9).

In v. 9, Paul asks, "how can you turn back...?" The verb, "turn back" comes from the Greek word, "ἐπιστρέφω," which is often used for conversion to Christ (cf. Acts 14:15; 1 Thess. 1:9). Instead of a *gracious conversion*, Paul fears the possibility that the Galatians may actually be in danger of a *deadly reversion!*

Persevering in the faith is the evidence that a person has truly come to know God. Those who truly know God adhere to the gospel until the end. They do not turn back to a "do this and live" principle for obtaining or maintaining their relationship with God.

In the Galatians case, Paul fears that if they continue in their desire to observe the Mosaic Law as a means of justification, he contemplates the possibility that they may not be truly converted (cf. 1 Cor. 15:2; Phil. 2:16; 1 Thess. 3:5). Only those who persevere in the faith will receive the Father's inheritance (4:7).

Yet, despite his bleak outlook, Paul is not without hope. There is a hint in v. 11 that the final disastrous outcome that Paul fears may not come about (i.e., condemnation by God). The hint is found in the word, "perhaps" (see NASB, πῶς).

Many of our English translations curiously leave it out. This word is used as an adverb and when following verbs of apprehension (φοβοῦμαι, "I fear") can be translated "that perhaps, lest somehow" (BDAG).

Though the Galatians' actions were a cause for fear in Paul, they had not yet totally renounced the faith. But, they were in the process of moving towards this as evidenced by their desire to observe the Mosaic calendar (Law). Chrysostom writes, "the wreck has not happened, but I see the storm big with it" (NPNF, "Galatians" vol. 13, p. 31).

Sheep don't see the spiritual dangers surrounding them but shepherds do! Therefore, as a faithful shepherd, Paul sees the storm coming and warns the Galatians of the imminent spiritual danger if they continue in their current path.

Though he does not count the Galatians as being like the Judaizers, he sees they are being led astray by their pagan teaching, thus the reason for his stern warning. "If you continue down this road, you very well may be giving evidence that you were never truly converted from the beginning."

Thus, Paul gives this stern warning to awaken the minds of the Galatians to their danger and to lead them to repentance. This passage serves as a serious reminder for us that true conversion doesn't consist of a one-time event in the past.

True conversion is evidenced by ongoing perseverance in the faith. Those who are truly saved demonstrate this by faithful adherence to the gospel. Whenever you feel your heart growing cold or being drawn to external religious practice for the pacification of your conscience, don't become apathetic and lethargic about it.

Rather, like Paul, fear!

The law is intended to awaken us out of our spiritual indifference and blindness. It holds forth to us the disastrous outcome of turning from faith in Christ (i.e., eternal condemnation!).

And once the law has done its convicting work and awakened you to the spiritual danger, let it drive you, not to despair, but rather back to Christ, who alone is the only source of your justification, redemption and adoption (i.e., salvation!).

REFLECTION:

To keep us then from falling from sonship to slavery (to ensure that we persevere until the end) we must constantly be (since we do not do a good job of preaching the gospel to ourselves):

1. REMINDED OF WHO WE WERE: IGNORANT OF GOD, V. 8.
2. REMINDED OF WHO WE ARE: KNOWN BY GOD, V. 9A-B.

And if we begin to waver and see our hearts growing cold and trusting more in our religious practices than in Christ alone and thus see our perseverance weakening, we must be:

3. WARNED OF WHO WE MAY BE: CONDEMNED BY GOD, VV. 9C-11.

The Law, then, serves a critical function along with the gospel in ensuring our perseverance. The Law warns and threatens but only the gospel empowers and sustains.

The law can warn us to persevere but only the gospel can give us the desire and power to persevere.

When we begin to drift, we must be reminded and warned of the consequences of turning from God. However, we must also be constantly reminded of who we are (or better whose we are).

To genuinely persevere in the faith, you must have an unremitting immersion in the truth of the gospel, namely that God has graciously set His affection and favor upon you forever.

And when you live with an assurance of God the Father's favor, you will not resort to striving for it, rather you will simply rest in His Fatherly favor because of what Christ has done for you and the Spirit has confirmed to you!

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