

The Book of Galatians

Lesson 8: Do Not Turn Back to Bondage -- Galatians 4:8-20

There is a strange pull in the human heart toward the very chains we have been freed from. The Israelites, only weeks out of Egypt, started reminiscing about the food back in slavery. A person rescued from an addiction can find themselves missing the thing that nearly killed them. Freedom can feel frighteningly open, and old bondage, for all its misery, at least felt familiar. Paul sees this pull at work in the Galatians, and it alarms him.

These are people who once knew nothing of the true God, enslaved to idols that were no gods at all. Then the gospel came, and they were set free, brought into a relationship with the living God, even, Paul says, known by God. And now, astonishingly, they are drifting back toward slavery, this time dressed in religious robes, taking up the observance of special days and seasons as though their standing with God depended on a calendar. Paul cannot believe his eyes. How can you turn back, he asks, to weak and worthless chains?

What makes this chapter so moving is that Paul does not argue here like a lawyer; he pleads like a parent. He reminds them of the early days, when they welcomed him despite his illness, when their joy was so full they would have given him their own eyes. What happened to all that gladness? Has he become their enemy simply because he tells them the truth? Meanwhile other teachers flatter them, fuss over them, court their affection, all to serve themselves.

And then Paul says something that opens a window into the very heart of ministry. He calls them his little children, and says he is in the pains of childbirth all over again, and will be until Christ is formed in them. That is the goal of everything: not merely that they hold correct opinions, not that they keep the right rules, but that Christ himself be formed in them. As we read, ask where you might be tempted to turn back, and what it would mean to press on until Christ is fully formed in you.

Group Discussion: Paul asks whether he has become the Galatians' enemy simply "by telling you the truth" (4:16). Why do we so often resist the people who love us enough to tell us hard truths, and how can a church become a place where loving truth is welcomed rather than resented?

Personal Reflection: Paul longs for Christ to be "formed in you" (4:19). When you think about your own spiritual life, is your aim mainly to know more and behave better, or to have Christ himself formed in you, and how would that difference show up day to day?

Read Galatians 4:8-20

Study Questions

1. Paul marvels that, “now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God,” the Galatians would “turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world” (4:9). What does it mean to be known by God, and why does Paul treat turning back to bondage as such a tragedy?
2. Paul warns against returning to the very slavery they were rescued from. Where in your own life are you tempted to go back to old patterns of bondage, habits, fears, or ways of earning approval, that Christ has already freed you from?
3. Paul is troubled that they “observe days and months and seasons and years” (4:10), taking up religious calendar-keeping as a way of securing their standing with God. How do we tell the difference between this kind of bondage to ritual and the genuine freedom of new covenant worship, such as gathering on the Lord’s Day?
4. Paul fears their faith is hardening into mere observance. Has your walk with Christ ever cooled into religious routine and rule-keeping, and what are the warning signs that relationship is slipping into mere ritual for you?
5. Paul recalls the Galatians’ former joy and asks, “What then has become of your blessedness?” (4:15). What happens to a believer’s joy when they drift from grace into law, and why does legalism so reliably drain the gladness out of faith?
6. Paul asks whether he has become their enemy “by telling you the truth” (4:16). How do you typically respond when someone who loves you tells you something true but hard to hear, and what would it look like to receive such truth with humility?
7. Paul exposes the false teachers: “They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them” (4:17). How can a believer discern teachers and influences by their true motives and fruit rather than by how flattering or attractive they seem?
8. Paul contrasts the flattery of false teachers with his own costly love. Whose approval or attention are you most tempted to crave, and how does that craving leave you open to being used or misled?
9. Paul calls the Galatians his “little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (4:19). What does it mean that the true goal of all Christian teaching and ministry is Christ being formed in us, and how does this reframe the whole Christian life as transformation into his likeness rather than merely gaining information or keeping rules?
10. Look back across the whole passage. Paul pleads with the Galatians not to turn back but to press on until Christ is fully formed in them. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you, this week, to move forward into freedom rather than slip back into bondage.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: 2 Peter 2:20–22, the danger of turning back to what one was rescued from; Hebrews 10:32–39, the call not to shrink back but to persevere; Colossians 2:16–23, freedom from the shadows of festivals and regulations now that Christ has come; Proverbs 27:5–6, the faithful wounds of a friend; Romans 8:28–29, being conformed to the image of God's Son.