

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON FIFTY-SEVEN)

“WHY BE A SLAVE AGAIN?”

GALATIANS 4:8-9

(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?

In our previous Lesson we 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. He writes, *“Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.”*

Paul is reminding the Galatians 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.

The **Message** translates **1 Corinthians 8:4-6**, as follows:

4 Some people say, quite rightly, that idols have no actual existence, that there’s nothing to them, that there is no God other than our one God,

5 that no matter how many of these so-called gods are named and worshiped they still don't add up to anything but a tall story.

6 They say — again, quite rightly — that there is only one God the Father, that everything comes from him, and that he wants us to live for him. Also, they say that there is only one Master — Jesus the Messiah — and that everything is for his sake, including us. Yes. It's true.

In this passage, Paul appears to be quoting the believers in Corinth concerning the issue of eating food offered to idols. They were of the opinion, and rightly so, that an idol has no real existence, and that the one true God is the only God. Paul agrees with their premise that the endless number of idols and gods worshiped by pagans were not actually gods. He acknowledges that there is no actual power or substance behind an idol. This is confirmed by the Psalmist in **Psalm 115:3-8**. The **New English Translation** renders the passage as follows:

3 Our God is in heaven. He does whatever he pleases.

4 Their idols are made of silver and gold—they are man-made.

5 They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see,

6 ears, but cannot hear, noses, but cannot smell,

7 hands, but cannot touch, feet, but cannot walk. They cannot even clear their throats.

8 Those who make them will end up like them, as will everyone who trusts in them.

Before they were saved, Paul says that the Galatians, “*did not know God.*” The word “*know*” is a translation of the Greek word **eido**: (**I'-do**), which means, “to know by perception; to know intuitively.” **Eido** is used to refer to fullness of knowledge, rather than a progress in knowledge. The word is in the **present tense** which indicates that prior to their conversion, the Galatian believers were in the settled state of not

knowing the one true and living God. The Greek word translated “not” signifies absolute negation.

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?*”

In verse **8**, Paul reminded the Galatian believers of the helpless and hopeless condition they were in **before** they were converted. He says that this was their state “*formerly.*” In verse **9**, He speaks of their **present** condition using one of the great “**But Now’s**” of the New Testament. This “*But now*” is used here in the same way that it is used in **Ephesians 2:12-13**:

12 remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

*13 **But now** in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

Formerly, the Galatians, “*did not know God.*” **But now** Paul says that they, “*have come to know God, or rather to be known by God.*” The Greek word translated “*know*” and “*known*” is **ginóskó**: (**ghin-océ’-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.

We stated earlier that in describing the state of the Galatians prior to their conversion in verse **8**, Paul says that they “*did not know God.*” We noted that the Greek word translated “*know*” in that verse was **eido** which means, “to know by perception.” It is a reference to intuitive knowledge. But when Paul speaks in verse **9** about them knowing God, and God knowing them, He uses **ginóskó**, not **eido**.

Brothers and sisters, knowledge possessed through the intellectual process of learning is one thing. But Knowledge gained experientially, by an active relationship between the one who knows and the one who is known, is far superior to the former. **Ginóskó** describes the knowledge that every follower of Christ has experienced as their personal, permanent possession regarding the Person of Christ. We know Him experientially and personally, and it is our desire, or at least it should be, to know Him more and more intimately.

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, which is similar to Jesus’ declaration in **John 15:16**: “*You did not choose me, but I chose you.*” If God had not first chosen and known us, we could never have chosen and known Him! Without God’s perspective, human beings would have no perspective at all regarding salvation!

In **1 John 5:20** we read the following: “*And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.*” In order for any human being to know God the Father, the Son, who is also God, has to give him or her, “*understanding.*”

Kenneth Wuest explains that,

“The expression ‘*known by God,*’ cannot refer merely to knowledge simply in a purely theocratic or intellectual sense, since the apostle must have regarded such knowledge by God as an ever present fact. The phrase must refer to God knowing the Galatians in a **saving way**...Paul adds the phrase, ‘*or rather are known of God*’ to the phrase ‘*after that ye have known God,*’ for the following reasons. It is to remind the Galatians that they do not owe their knowledge of God to themselves, but to Him. Their escape from idolatry and bondage to law

was not effected by any knowledge they acquired of God, but by God coming to know them in a saving way. Hence, they should clearly see the folly and wrong of abandoning this advantageous position to take an inferior one from which they had been rescued."

God knew us before we knew Him. Indeed, it is His knowing of us that is the cause of our knowing of Him. If God in eternity "foreknows" a man or a woman, He grants to that man or woman the ability to know Him in time and for eternity. The person who is the subject of God's foreknowledge enters into the knowledge of God. Paul informs us of this in **Romans 8:29-30**:

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.

30 And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Brothers and sisters, we could only come to know God because He first knew us. And why did He know us? Because He loved us. And why did He love us? Because He chose to love us? And why did He choose to love us? Because He chose to! In **1 John 4:10**, John says, "*In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*"

Stuart Townend understands this, for in his "**Salvation's Song**" he writes,

*"Loved before the dawn of time,
Chosen by my Maker,
Hidden in my Saviour,
I am His and He is mine,
Cherished for eternity."*

As a result of God's foreknowledge of them, the Galatian believers did not just know about God, but they knew Him experientially, personally and intimately. They enjoyed fellowship with the Holy One of Israel.

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?"* This is a question pregnant with shock, sadness and wonder! 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. The words *"turn back"* are in the **present tense**. "How is it possible that you are turning back?" Paul asks them. The Galatian believers were in the process of turning back from grace to law while Paul was in the process of writing this letter to them.

Most of the believers in the Galatian church were Gentiles. Before they were saved they were pagan idolaters worshipping gods like Zeus and Hermes-gods who were no gods in reality. Now that they were believers in Jesus Christ, they were turning to the Mosaic Law, which as far as Paul was concerned, was like going back into the idolatry from which they had come out when they believed the Gospel and were saved.

Paul says they were *"turning back again."* The Galatians, in turning to a system of legalism, would be returning to their former position which was a state of bondage under law. In turning to legalism, the Galatians were not turning to a new error, but to an old one-the error of a rules-based, performance-driven system of salvation. They were turning back again to live like little children under the supervision of guardians and managers, instead of continuing to live as adult sons. They were turning back again to live like slaves under law instead of continuing to live as free-men under grace. Paul says that they were turning back again *"to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world."*

When we considered verse **3** in Lesson **52**, we explained that the phrase, “*elementary principles*” is a translation of the Greek word **stoicheion**: (**stoy-khi’-on**). The word describes something orderly in arrangement as for example of things in a row and hence an element. In most of its uses, it denotes an elementary or fundamental principle in a subject or discipline. It refers to the first principles of something, for example, the basics or fundamentals of Christianity. The phrase is probably used by Paul here as a reference to the first principles of non-Christian humanity; in the case of the Jew, it is a reference to the symbolic and ceremonial character of Judaism and its legal enactments, and in the case of the Gentiles, it is a reference to the ceremonial and ritualistic observances of the pagan religions.

The “**Jewish New Testament Commentary**,” has a very interesting comment on the phrase “*elementary principles*”:

“We, both Jews and Gentiles, were slaves to them. Gentiles served these demonic spirits as gods. Jews, though knowing the one true God, were sometimes led astray by demonic spirits, including the demonic spirit of legalism. Jews served this spirit whenever they perverted the Torah into a legalistic system...”

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.

Wayne Barber, commenting on this verse says the following:

“Why would you go back to religion which requires performance, and performance is nothing that God accepts?...Have you ever tried to go

back to some religious performance mentality and realized there's nothing here? You can have your quiet time till you fall over in the floor, but if you're not there to meet God out of love for Him, it's not going to do a thing in the world for you, but just suck some time out of your life. That's all it's going to do. You can give your tithe to the church, and you can do that and do that and do that. It can become so mechanical all you end up is broke. It hasn't done any good. It's weak. **It's not in the doing.** He said the doing isn't the key. **It's the becoming.** And he says all religion offers is weak...Your ideas, your religion, your system, your rules, your regulations, he says...they are weak, and they are worthless, and you have desired—it blows me away—you have chosen, you have committed yourself to going back to the very thing Jesus has freed you from."

Before the Galatian believers were saved by the grace of God, all their religious works had accomplished nothing in regard to their being declared righteous before a holy God! Their former religious practices provided no supernatural power for living, for progressive growth in Christ-likeness. "Why in the world would you want to go back to that?" Paul asks them. "Why would you want to be enslaved again by the very things that Christ delivered you from?"

Brothers and sisters, legalism robs us of our Christian liberty. It negates the amazing grace of God in our lives and reduces us to spiritual poverty. It is idolatry to turn from Christ to the Law or any other system of rule-keeping!

William Hendriksen remarks that,

"People who prefer the law to the gospel are like Aesop's dog who let go of the meat to snatch at the shadow in the water...The law is weak and poor, the sinner is weak and poor: two feeble beggars trying to help each other. They cannot do it. They only wear each other out. But through Christ a weak and poor sinner is revived and enriched unto eternal life."

Brothers and sisters, we need to continually examine ourselves to see if we are harbouring legalistic tendencies in our hearts. If we do, then we can rest assured that they will make us spiritual beggars if we practice them. If we truly desire to overcome sin, we must come **out** from under law and come **in** under grace. This is exactly what Paul tells us in **Romans 6:14**. The **New English Translation** renders the verse as follows: *“For sin will have no mastery over you, **because** you are not under law but under grace.”*

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.” The word primarily refers to the exercising of one’s will with the underlying sense of being willing. **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.

How dangerous is legalism! It is particularly devastating because it offers false hope. Instead of liberating persons and enabling them to live lives that are pleasing to God, legalism traps them in a cycle of futile effort and failure, leading to more futile effort and failure. When they fail to live up to the standards that they have set for themselves, legalists, instead of abandoning their efforts to please God by their religious performance, try harder and harder, only to end up becoming more and more frustrated.

Brothers and sisters, when we fail in the Christian life, we should apply grace, not renewed effort, as the primary means for restoring our fractured fellowship with the Father.

Romans 8:33-34

33 Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.

34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

Hebrews 10:14

“For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”

1 John 1:8-9

8 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 2:1-2 (New English Translation)

1 My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous.

2 He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not only our sins but the sins of all the world.

1 John 3:20

“For whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.”

Jude 24-25

24 Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy,

25 to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.