

GALATIANS: THE ONE TRUE GOSPEL



WEEK 17 CAN'T GO BACK: A CAUSE FOR CONCERN GALATIANS 4:8-11

Van Nuys Bible Study
Doulos Fellowship Group
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Galatians 4:8-11 – Can't Go Back: A Cause for Concern

The Text

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.

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?

You observe days and months and seasons and years!

I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

Introduction

- “False brothers” (the Judaizers) have infiltrated the Galatian churches.
 - Paul is astonished that some of the Galatians are abandoning the gospel to be justified by the law.
 - He has stressed the superiority of the promise God made to Abraham and the inferiority of the law to bring salvation.
 - The law was not given to replace the promise, but to increase transgressions and show how important the promise really is.
 - Those who put their faith in Christ (Abraham’s seed) are recipients of God’s promise to Abraham.
 - As he finishes his case for freedom over slavery, Paul expresses his concern and transitions into a desperate appeal.
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Principal Proposition

We once were slaves, now we are free... it is ludicrous to consider going back to being slaves.

Literary Context

- A. Paul's Gospel is God's Gospel (1:11-2:21)
 - B. Paul's Explanation of the Gospel (3:1-4:11)
 - 1. The Experience of the Galatians (3:1-5)
 - 2. The Example of Abraham (3:6-9)
 - 3. The Curse of the Law (3:10-14)
 - 4. **The Law and the Abrahamic Covenant (3:15-4:11)**
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Literary Structure

Can't Go Back: A Cause for Concern

The Former	(v. 8)
The Freedom	(v. 9)
The Folly	(v. 10)
The Fear	(v. 11)

Interpretive Comments

Can't Go Back: A Cause for Concern

The Former

v. 8 Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.

➤ “Formerly, when you did not know God”

- Thanks to Adam, we all start from the same place.
- This is the third time Paul speaks of their former state of slavery (Galatians 3:23; 4:1).
- What is Paul referring to when he says, “you did not know God?” (Knowledge of Who God is, salvation from man's perspective, etc.?)



- “you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods”
 - This former state is marked with ignorance of the one true God. Unbelievers worship those who are not gods.
 - This likely refers to demonic spirits that control false religious practices (1 Corinthians 10:20).

The Freedom

v. 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?

- “But now that you have come to know God”
 - Ignorance has been replaced with enlightenment and salvation has come!
- “or rather to be known by God”
 - Because God is all-knowing, what is Paul referring to when he says, “known by God?”
 - Paul is not correcting or contradicting himself, but clarifying his point with accuracy.
 - Man’s perspective and God’s perspective are not often aligned.
- “how can you turn back again”
 - Paul cannot hide his shock. He is “astonished” (1:6) and “perplexed” (4:20) by these people. Their behavior is startling and inconsistent with natural spiritual growth.



How can you go back to the things of your spiritual childhood? As well may full-grown men begin again to read their ABC's and learn from baby picture books! – Charles Spurgeon

- “to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world”
 - Paul equates slavery under the law to the bondage of paganism.
 - His intended meaning of “elementary principles of the world” is still debatable. The most likely answers are:
 - Demon spirits who rule the current world system (over unbelievers)
 - Man’s faulty reasoning (an uninformed/unregenerate worldview)
 - The basics principles of human religion (broad idolatry)
 - Regardless, these elementary principles are weak, worthless, and tied to their former unregenerate way of life.
- “whose slaves you want to be once more”
 - Who wants to be a slave?
 - The idea of returning to slavery after freedom is ridiculous.

Now that you are free adults in through faith in Christ, why do you want to revert to your childhood servitude under the law? – John MacArthur

The Folly

v. 10 You observe days and months and seasons and years!

- “You observe days and months and seasons and years”
 - During his time in Galatia, Paul gave the same warning he gave to the church in Colossae (Colossians 2:16-17).
 - The Jews had many days and months and season and years to observe under the Mosaic Law (Leviticus 23:5, 16, 28; 25:4).
 - The Sabbath, particularly, has been abolished since the passing of the Old Covenant and the arrival of the New (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2).
 - Gentile religions observe special days as well.

To keep holy days and practice symbolical ceremonies is contrary to the very spirit of Christianity. And those who do so lead us to suspect that they do not know the gospel at all. – Charles Spurgeon

The Fear

v. 11 I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

➤ “I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain”

- The Holman Christian Standard translation says, “I am fearful for you, that perhaps my labor for you has been wasted.”
- Paul’s concern is extremely legitimate. The danger of embracing slavery has stronger implications than abandoning the rights of sonship... but abandoning God.
- This statement is enough to scare anyone. But look at how Paul begins his next statement... he begs them as brothers.



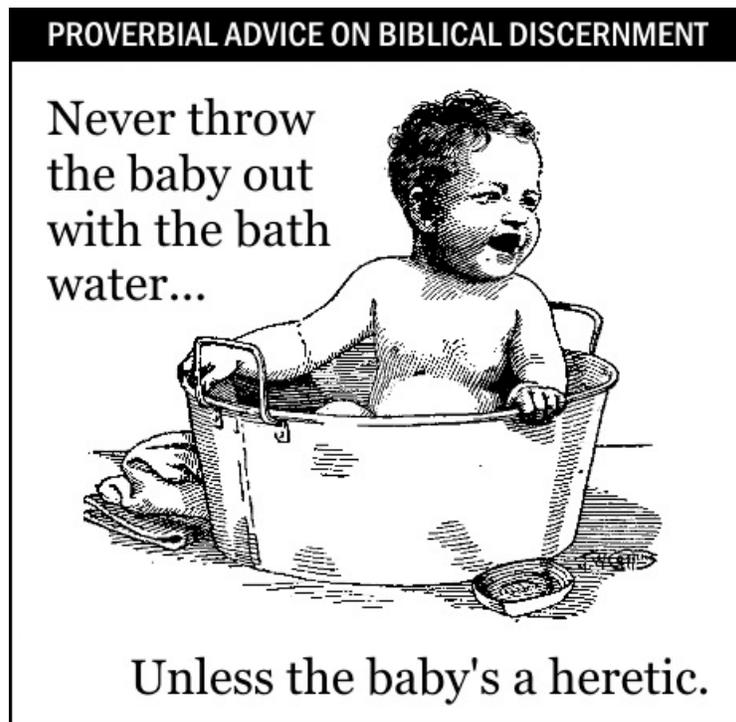
Summary

Paul explains why he fears that his apostolic labors may be in vain. The Galatians are relapsing back into paganism, but in a most remarkable way, for their relapse manifests itself in their desire to subject themselves to the Mosaic Law.

– Thomas Schreiner

Discussion Questions

- What is Paul referring to when he says, “you did not know God?” (Knowledge of Who God is, salvation from man’s perspective, etc.?) (pg. 2)
- Because God is all-knowing, what is Paul referring to when he says, “known by God?” (pg. 3)



Final Food For Thought

What is a true knowledge of God?

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True Knowledge of God

In 1 Tim. 6:20–21 Paul warns Timothy against “what is falsely called ‘knowledge,’ for by professing it some have swerved from the faith.” Paul’s attack is against religious tendencies that developed into Gnosticism in the second century A.D. Teachers of such ideas told believers to see their Christian commitment as only a first step along the road to “knowledge” (*gnosis* in Greek), and urged them to take more steps along that road. These teachers viewed the material order as worthless and considered the body to be a prison for the soul. Their answer to human spiritual need was illumination, that is, to attain a certain “knowledge” reserved for the few. They denied that sin was part of the problem, and the “knowledge” they offered made use of celestial passwords and disciplines of mysticism and detachment. To them, Jesus was a supernatural teacher, but a human being only in appearance; they denied the Incarnation and the Atonement. They replaced Christ’s call to a life of holy love with asceticism or licentiousness. Paul’s letters to Timothy (1 Tim. 1:3–4; 4:1–7; 6:20–21; 2 Tim. 3:1–9); Jude 4, 8–19; 2 Pet. 2, and the first two letters of John (1 John 1:5–10; 2:9–11, 18–29; 3:7–10; 4:1–6; 5:1–12; 2 John 7–11) explicitly oppose beliefs and practices that would later be recognized as Gnosticism.

By contrast, Scripture speaks of “knowing” God as the spiritual person’s ideal: namely, the fullness of a faith relationship that brings salvation and eternal life, generating love, hope, obedience, and joy (Ex. 33:13; Jer. 31:34; Dan. 11:32; John 17:3; Gal. 4:8, 9; Phil. 3:8–11; 2 Tim. 1:12; Heb. 8:8–12). The dimensions of this knowledge are intellectual (knowing the truth about God; Deut. 7:9; Ps. 100:3); volitional (trusting, obeying, and worshiping God); and moral (practicing justice and love; Jer. 22:16; 1 John 4:7–8). Faith’s knowledge focuses on Jesus Christ, the incarnate God and the mediator between God and man. Faith seeks specifically to know Christ and His power (Phil. 3:8–14). The knowledge fostered by God’s covenant agreement with us is reciprocal, with affection on both sides: we know God as ours because He knows us as His (John 10:14; Gal. 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:19)¹

¹ R. C. Sproul, ed., *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version* (Orlando, FL; Lake Mary, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2005), 1067.