



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Galatians 4: 8-20

Spring 2021

"Love's Labor"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Joe. Well we are continuing our studies in the Book of Galatians. We've had a break, for what, two weeks or so. So we're back into Galatians chapter 4, and we're going to look at verses 8 through 20,

⁸ However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. ⁹ But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? ¹⁰ You observe days and months and seasons and years. ¹¹ I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.

¹² I beg of you, brethren, become as I *am*, for I also *have become* as you *are*. You have done me no wrong; ¹³ but you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; ¹⁴ and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus *Himself*. ¹⁵ Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me. ¹⁶ So have I become your enemy by telling you the truth? ¹⁷ They eagerly seek you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out so that you will seek them. ¹⁸ But it is good always to be eagerly sought in a commendable manner,

and not only when I am present with you. ¹⁹ My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you— ²⁰ but I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

Galatians 4: 8-20

May the LORD bless this reading of His Word and bless our time in studying it together.

(Message) Christ has washed our sins away. Now if that's true, and that's exactly what Paul is preaching here, then nothing more need be done. It's all complete. That's really, I think, the essence of the Book of Galatians. You can't add anything to what Christ has done.

But the Book of Galatians has been called a fighting epistle. In it Paul fights like a warrior for the truth of the Gospel—but also, like a pastor, like a shepherd, for the souls of the sheep. A better analogy is that of a parent. He calls the Galatians, “My children”, in verse 19, and says, “...I am again in labor, suffering birth pains for you.” So Paul, the great ‘Lion of God’, as Augustine called him, was also like a mother. Or to borrow the LORD's metaphor, like a mother hen, gathering her chicks under her wings for protection.

They needed that. They were being drawn away into the error of legalism. They were being taught that they needed to keep the Law of Moses in order to be fully accepted by God. They were in the process of exchanging truth for error, the Gospel for another gospel, which is not another. They were in danger of apostasy and Paul was deeply concerned. He has forcefully argued from Scripture for the Gospel of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. And he reasoned with them from their own experience, reminding them that they originally received the Holy Spirit apart from the Law. They were accepted by God and they were fully equipped to live life.

Now in chapter 4, in verses 8 through 20, Paul again recalls their past experience in order to direct them back onto the right path. He reminds them of the great deliverance they had when they first believed and the joy they had experienced. But now they had lost that joy by turning from grace to Law. —Didn't that tell them something? They weren't going forward into a fuller relationship with the LORD, but backwards into slavery. They were abandoning their liberty as sons and heirs of God for bondage.

In fact, in verse 8, Paul tells them that they were in effect going back to their former life of ignorance and slavery and paganism and that was a time, he says, 'when they did not know God'. And so they were slaves to those things which by nature are no gods—the idols. They may be considered gods by the world, but there's no deity in those things—they're just blocks of wood or stone. In fact, behind the idols are demons. That's what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10, verse 20.

In the opening scene of *Paradise Lost*, John Milton describes Lucifer laying vanquished in hell. It's not quite the way it happened. It's not the way it happened. It's not a great biblical explanation of things but it's good poetry—and he has some very interesting things to say in that Satan has been cast out of heaven. And in that scene he's surrounded by all of the fallen angels. And they all have the names of the heathen gods: Molech, Chemosh, Baal, Dagon, the gods of Canaan, the gods of Egypt, the gods of Greece and Rome.

I think he was accurate in that. That was the true, spiritual nature of the Gentile gods. They're no gods. They were demons. And the Galatians had lived under their malign influence in slavish fear and degrading practices. Well now that former enslavement is somewhat understandable, not excusable, (there's enough revelation in nature to tell us that these gods, so-called, are not gods at all), but somewhat understandable. They were living in ignorance; they were in darkness. They did not know, had not heard, of the only true God. But now there is no excuse for their present conduct.

So Paul asks them in verse 9, how it is that after being delivered, after coming to know God, they could then turn away from Him and go back “to the weak and worthless elemental things”, as he calls them? How could they turn from the power of grace in the Gospel for the ineffective things of paganism “to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?” (vs9).

Now, in fact, the Galatians were not returning to paganism. They were putting themselves under the Law of Moses, and the two, it would certainly seem, could not be any more different from one another. The first two commandments of the Ten Commandments condemn idolatry. But the legalism of the Judaizers was of the same character, or principle, as that of the heathen religions in one essential way, both are opposed to grace. Both are systems of works: Of gaining God's acceptance, or the acceptance of ‘the gods’ by effort and by human merit. And both are weak and worthless because they have no power to impart life. They cannot give the riches and inheritance that is ours in Christ, through grace alone. The religions of the world differ from one another in many respects—but at their core they all are the same. They are about keeping rules or ceremonies to gain salvation. And they're worthless.

Christianity alone is different. It's all about grace, about the free gift of salvation, and the power of God and the Gospel to change lives, and to make people into a new creation. It is God's work—it's not man's work.

Now Paul says that the Galatians had come to know Him. In their pagan days they had been ignorant of Him. But now, he says, they have come to know God. Better still, he says, they had come to be known by God. Now the difference between that is significant. They did know God. That was a fact. That was a reality. And the word that God uses for knowledge is one that speaks of knowledge gained by observation and experience, so they knew Him by experience. They knew Him personally. They had a relationship with Him.

But it was not as though they had sought out God in the darkness and found Him—He found them. They were the objects of God's knowledge. God had made the

connection. He had taken the initiative, the first step, when they were in ignorance—when they were in bondage. And so to make that clear, Paul makes a change from ‘you have come to know God’, to ‘be known by God.’ It's a way of describing God's unconditional election and irresistible grace.

The emphasis here is on sovereign grace, on the free gift of salvation, which is highlighted by the contrast that he makes between verses 8 and 9 in that phrase, “But now”. We find that phrase in Ephesians chapter 2, (in verses 1-5), where Paul is contrasting their previous condition with their present condition: that they “were dead in their trespasses and sins...But God, being rich in mercy...” made them alive. He said, “made us alive”. All of us, Jew and Gentile alike, who have been enabled to believe in Christ. Here we have, you did not know God, “But now” you have come to “be known by God.” (vs 8&9).

John Newton picked up on that. We sang, what, two of his hymns this morning—great hymns. He picked up on that phrase, “But now”, and used it in his most famous hymn, *Amazing Grace*. You know his sad story in human trafficking in the slave trade, but he was miraculously saved and delivered from all of that. So he wrote, "I once was lost, *but now* am found, was blind, *but now* I see." Newton understood grace. He knew what it meant to be ‘a brand plucked from fire.’ (Zec 3:2).

These Galatians had known that as well—but they were forgetting it. Paul asks, how is it that you turn back again? The word *turn* is in the present tense, and the grammar's important here. It indicates that they were in the process of turning. They had not yet actually made the complete turn; it was a process they were in; they were not yet committed to the elemental things of legalism that is salvation by law. There was still hope for them.

But Paul was alarmed that they had made a start in that direction. They were already keeping the Jewish calendar, verse 10, “You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain”. The problem wasn't that they were observing the Sabbath or the Jewish feast days. Paul was

free from that. We are free from that. We're free from all of these regulations and ceremonies.

But Paul was also free to do that. Freedom was not only free 'not to', but free 'to do'. And we see him doing that in the Book of Acts. He arranged his visits to Jerusalem according to the Jewish calendar. He participated in those things. He was free to conform to Jewish Law and custom when he was in Jewish company, and free not to conform when he was among the Gentiles. He did according to his wisdom—what best promoted the Gospel without offense.

The church is not required to observe the days and seasons and years of the Jewish calendar. It's not required to observe that, or an ecclesiastical calendar either. But the Galatians were following the religious schedule of the Law, not as a freedom, but as an obligation. They were again becoming slaves to the "elemental things". So Paul says, "I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain." (vs11). He feared that in adopting the Law, they were rejecting the Gospel and approaching apostasy.

Law and grace cannot be mixed. Trying to have the works of the Law or human merit with faith results in loss and no justification with God. And so pursuing such a path will end in ruin, in apostasy, and rejecting Christ irrevocably.

One way the LORD prevents that and keeps us persevering, continuing in faith, is through the warnings of Scripture. And those who have ears to hear will hear, and they will respond, they will repent. In verse 12, Paul pleads with the Galatians to adopt his understanding of the Law, "I beg of you brethren, become as I *am*, for I also *have become* as you *are*." Paul became as they are by becoming like a Gentile when he came to Galatia. He didn't come preaching the Law or observing the days and diets of the Law. He came without the Law. And he begged them to have the same attitude about the Law. —It was a plea for them to enjoy their Christian liberty.

They originally had that freedom and joy when they first accepted his preaching, and they showed unusual kindness to him. In verse 14 he says, they received him "as an angel of God", which was very unusual because when he came to them, he was not at

his best. He was suffering from a severe physical illness. In fact in verse 13, he says that it was because of this illness that he preached to them the first time. Evidently it was so severe that it required that he remain there, where they were, to recuperate. It forced him to be among them but that's when he had the occasion to speak to them.

Now there's been a lot of speculation about what this illness was. One of the suggestions is that it was malaria, which he caught along the mosquito infested southern coast of Asia Minor forcing him to higher elevations where the air was safer. Another suggestion is epilepsy. The most common view is that it is *ophthalmia* which is an affliction of the eyes that made his appearance repugnant. It was very common in the Middle East until, I guess, fairly recently. Even Napoleon's army suffered from this. Their soldiers, a number of them, became infected with this; affected their eyes, and it affected them so severely that many of them went blind.

So, if that is the case, it would allow him to preach, but his appearance would have been very unpleasant to see. —So it would have been a trial for them. There's some evidence for that from the text itself because, in verse 15 he says, "...you would have plucked your eyes out and given them to me." Whatever the illness was, it was probably the same thing that he refers to in 2 Corinthians chapter 12, in verse 7, and his "...thorn in the flesh...", which he calls "...a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from exalting myself."

But this also says a lot about the Galatians, because as Paul says in verse 14, "it was a trial" for them. They were tempted to "*despise*" him because of his appearance. And that word literally means something like '*spit out*'. So they might have rejected him with disgust or loathing, but they didn't. In fact, they received him gladly. In fact, they received him as "an angel of God, as Christ Jesus *Himself*." They loved the apostle. No wonder Paul loved the Galatians and felt deeply for them.

But this made it all the sadder that their attitude had changed toward him. He asks, in verse 15, "Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me." 'There

was a time', Paul was saying, 'when you would have done anything for me, even blinded yourselves.'

There's an ancient story about two Scythians, barbarians, who were best friends. One of them was captured by the enemy and the other sacrificed his eyes to ransom him from captivity. When the captured friend was freed, he blinded himself because he could not bear to see his friend's blindness. There was a time when the Galatians would have done the same for Paul.

But all that had changed. Now they felt differently about him. They felt differently about everything. They had lost the sense of blessing that they originally had. That's what legalism does. It robs people of blessing and turns hearts cold. Before, Paul had come and proclaimed grace—and they learned about the forgiveness of sin through faith alone—the free gift of salvation. They rejoiced! They had life. They were clean. They were free! —That's what grace produces. Happiness; and rest; and relief. Christ delivers us from daily grinding 'at the mill of works', so that we obey Him out of love because we understand God's love. We want to serve Him gladly because we know what He's done for us, and what He is doing and will do for us.

These Galatians had understood that and loved Paul for bringing them this message of good news, this 'Gospel of freedom'...Then the Judaizers came...the legalizers came...and the Galatians' gratitude dried up and pride grew under the burden of the Law.

So now Paul, who had been 'like an angel to them, like Christ to them', was their enemy. And the reason he says in verse 16 is that he had told them "the truth"—he had taught grace. The teachers of the Law had come claiming that Paul had really shortchanged them, that he had not given them the full Gospel, the complete Gospel, that the Law was also necessary if they're to be fully accepted by God. So Paul had not taught them that and that Paul was, in fact, a false teacher. These were convincing people, evidently, because the Galatians came under their spell. They were 'bewitched' with legalism and they came to distrust Paul. They considered him their enemy.

That's not uncommon. In fact, I would say that's the norm. Some of you may have become the enemy of some friend or family member for giving them the Gospel—for speaking the truth. If that's true, then you're in good company. You're right there with the apostle Paul. But you're no enemy—not really. You are the greatest friend that person has ever had.

No, the real enemy, Paul explains, is the Judaizers. It's those who come and pervert the Gospel. It's those who come and add some work to the Gospel. It's those who deny the grace of God. And that's what the Judaizers were doing. They were completely self-serving. That was the reason that they came to Galatia—to gain the Galatians for themselves. He says in verse 17, "They eagerly seek you..." Literally, 'they are zealous for you', which is not bad in itself. There's nothing wrong with people showing an interest in you. Parents are zealous for their children. They are eager for them to have what is best, to know the truth, and to live well, and live rightly. In fact Paul says, in verse 18, 'It's good to be sought in a commendable manner.' He had come to Galatia seeking them, in that way, in that commendable manner, because he was seeking them for Christ.

But these Judaizers were not seeking them in that way. They weren't courting them for Christ. They were seducing them, bewitching them for themselves. Paul writes, "...they wish to shut you out so that you will seek them", meaning, 'shut them out from Paul's influence and his teaching on grace.' That was the reason they attacked his apostleship, in order to isolate them from his influence. And they succeeded. They convinced these Galatians that Paul was not their friend, he was their enemy.

They wanted the Galatians to depend on them for spiritual counsel. The Judaizers were building their own kingdom; a kingdom for themselves. And it's easy to fall into that. We all need to examine our motives in regard to that. Paul's motives were pure. Paul's motives were selfless. He understood that his task, as a spiritual leader, was to direct people to love and follow Christ—not to promote himself. And he was completely devoted to that. His only concern was for them. It was to help the Galatians to grow in Christ.

His concern for them was like that of a mother for her children. He writes, "My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you." (vs19). He wanted them to grow in the faith and become like Christ, just as parents want their children to grow up into maturity. And the effort he gave to see that happen, and the emotion that he felt for them, is compared to that of a mother in birth pains. He went through labor with them the first time when he originally brought the Gospel to them. He suffered severe illness, suffered persecution, and through his efforts, by God's grace, they were born again.

But now he is "again" in labor with them, suffering all over again with the pains of worry, the work of prayer, and the difficult effort that it took to reclaim them for the truth. He doesn't deny their salvation—but their spiritual condition was weak and immature. They had so regressed that it was as though, as Calvin said, "They had become embryos again." Paul has to bring them back to their original understanding with him when they first believed the Gospel. It took great effort on his part, but out of great love for them he labored for them. And he was determined to labor for them until the "shapeless embryos" became mature people in Christ, "...until..." he says, "...Christ is formed in you." (vs19). That was the apostle's goal for God's people. In fact, that's God's goal for us.

J. I. Packer once recalled a sermon he heard shortly before he became a Christian, in which the minister said, "What God wants in our lives is more of His son." Well, that's true. And that happens because through faith we have been placed in Christ. We are mysteriously joined to Him. And through that, the indwelling Holy Spirit, Christ's life is communicated to us. It is transferred to us. Jesus promised that in John, chapter 10, verse 28. "I give eternal life to them." It is resurrection life. It is powerful life. It is dynamic. It is life transforming life. Every child of God is undergoing a supernatural change. Every one of you have put your faith in Christ, and you're joined to Christ, you are being changed.

The word *formed* is a passive verb, which indicates that the Galatians were the objects of God's work. It's not their activity—it's the LORD's activity. Now He uses instruments and agents to accomplish this change in us: teachers and friends; and even circumstances—oftentimes difficult circumstances. But primarily He uses His Word to enlighten our hearts and empower us. It's His work. But that work of the Spirit within us produces a response in us. It generates effort in us, which we are responsible to make, so that we apply ourselves to the study of Scripture. And as we do that we are transformed by it.

Paul describes the process in 2 Corinthians chapter 3, in verse 18 in similar language. Instead of Christ being formed in us, he writes of us *transformed*. It's basically the same word that he uses here in verse 19. It has the same root, the same idea. So he writes in 2 Corinthians 3:18, "...beholding as in a mirror the glory of the LORD, *we are*," he says, "being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the LORD, the Spirit." In other words, the LORD, the Holy Spirit, transforms us into the image of Christ, as we study and see Christ in Scripture. It's as though the Scripture is spiritual food. And as we see it, read it, believe what we're reading, it has its actual effect upon our inner man, our soul—so that we are transformed, strengthened, become more and more like Christ.

The Law with its rules and ceremonies can threaten, but it can't produce that. It doesn't convert, it convicts. And it's important in that use, in that function—but it doesn't save. It doesn't have power to save. Ralph Erskine was a Scot and minister in the 18th century and he put the problem and solution into a simple verse. He wrote:

"A rigid matter was the law,
demanding brick, denying straw,
But when with gospel tongue it sings,
it bids me fly and gives me wings."

Now that verse, that simple verse, has been put different ways and attributed to different people. In fact, one to whom it's attributed is John Bunyan, (I don't think correctly), but nevertheless, in that verse, and it's:

"Run, John, run, the law commands,
But gives us neither feet nor hands,
Far better news the gospel brings;
It bids us fly and gives us wings."

Well, you see the point, it's the point that Paul be making here, the Gospel frees the believer because the Holy Spirit uses it to form us into Christlike people, making us grow and become mature people of faith. It is all a work of grace, and it is a powerful, life changing work of grace.

Now Paul believed that the Galatians were in Christ. He calls them children. But it wasn't enough that they were in Christ—he wanted to see Christ formed in them. He wanted to carry on his work of labor of love, of helping that happen, by being there, being in their presence. And he concludes by saying that he wished he could be present with them, and change his tone. He wouldn't change his teaching. That's not what he wants to change. He doesn't want to be with them to change his doctrine. He wished he could be there with them to reinforce the great doctrines of grace and justification and sanctification.

Now you know the difference between those, don't you? Justification and sanctification are different from one another but inseparable from one another. Justification is a legal declaration in which God pronounces the believer in Jesus Christ, the one who has joined himself or herself to Him as just; as forgiven; as innocent; and as righteous. It is a change of status, a change in our relationship with God. We are now accepted by Him, fully and completely at the moment of faith. It's a legal distinction, a

legal description of our position with Him. Doesn't change us materially. It changes our status with God.

Sanctification, though, which occurs based upon that position of justification is a change of us: A change of our inner life, in which we are strengthened, we are conformed to the image of Christ. And Paul wants to be there to teach them these things and to teach them the truth of it; the grace of it in person. But he'd like to do it in milder language. He doesn't want to be giving them a 'fighting epistle', as it were. He wants to be there to use milder language and win them back in that way with kindness and love.

Loving parents don't enjoy disciplining their children, necessary as it is. They prefer to be gentle rather than harsh. And Paul wanted to speak to them in a kindly way. He needed to do that, to speak to them at length, because though he believed them to be justified, to be children of God, "brethren", as he calls them in verse 12, still he says, "I am perplexed about you." (vs20).

Paul is very much a model for us. We should be concerned for one another's spiritual development, and laboring for it. Speaking the truth to one another in love should be characteristic of that—of this congregation and of every congregation. We're joined together and we should have this mutual concern, this mutual love. And the Galatians are a warning to us of how easy it is to slip away from the truth, to be hypnotized or bewitched by false ideas, to fail to grow, and in fact, to regress spiritually.

It's in us to do that, so may God help us to see that danger, to avoid the pitfalls of legalism or any diversion from the Gospel. To always be seeking to grow in God's grace, and have Christ transforming us, and for us to be transformed into His image. Now that's why we preach the Word every Sunday morning and that's why we're to be encouraging one another.

But first, before that can happen, you must be joined to Christ and His life. And that happens through faith in Him. So if you're here without having believed in Christ,

you're separate from Him. You're separate from His life. You don't know it. You don't have it. So we invite you to come to Christ—and coming to Christ means believing in Him, believing in Jesus Christ as God's eternal Son, equal with the Father in essence and glory; the One who became a man in order to be our Savior. And we receive Him simply through faith alone. And in that we have eternal life, the forgiveness of sins, and a glorious future. And the privilege of ministering to one another in this life. May God help you to do that, help you to come to Him. Let's bow in a word of prayer.

Father, we thank You for this time together and this opportunity to study together, to worship together. We pray that You would bless us, keep us strong, keep us vigilant in the faith, keep us holding to the great doctrines of Your sovereign grace; so that we might live well and serve You well, and serve one another.

The LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace. In Christ's name. Amen.

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