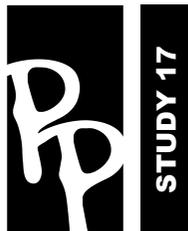


SURELY YOU DON'T WANT TO

GO BACK TO SLAVERY!



## Galatians 4:8-11



This Study Paper contains the following

- Introduction to the passage
- What these verses mean
- Summary
- A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
- Over to you

### Introduction to the passage

Paul, having written about the glories of the gospel, now switches back to the miserable state of the Galatian believers. In this section Paul appeals to them not to go back to the sort of religious habits they had before they were Christians, but to live according to their new knowledge of God.

### What these verses mean

Verse 8

#### **Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves**

All people, including Christian believers, begin their lives in the slavery of sin, captured by the ways of this world. The Galatians were no different. Their lives had been pagan until they heard the gospel of free salvation by Jesus Christ. For the Jews, their slavery to the principles of this world was in the belief that the strict observance of the law would make them right with God.

#### **to those who by nature are not gods.**

Idolatry had been their previous form of worship. Their idols were called gods (1 Co. 8:5). But that was empty talk. Idols are meaningless in themselves. But they are the result of the influence of devils, as Paul says (1 Co. 10:20). Whoever serves idols actually serves devils, which have not the nature of God. Idolatry is the worship of anything but the one true God. It is universal amongst mankind, as widespread

today as it was in the first century. This is because it is any system that does not have Christ as central to its worship and teaching. This includes other religions, materialism, atheism and also much of Christianity where it is based upon ritual, liturgy and man-made objects.

Verse 9

#### **But now that you know God – or rather are known by God –**

The Greek word “know” in this verse is different from the word “know” in verse 8. Here, the word that is used emphasises knowledge of a personal relationship; in verse 8 the word usually means a knowledge of facts. Paul explains that there is a close relationship between believers and God. They know him and he knows them. (Contrast Matthew 7:23). Moreover, Christians do not owe their knowledge of God to themselves but to him. Compare John 15:16; 1 John 4:19.

#### **how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles?**

See Study 16 and the note on verse 3 (page 139) about the principles of the world. Trying to keep religious rules and ceremonies is a weak and miserable principle. It is this world’s philosophy that puts forward the notion that God can be appeased by human effort and action. It is an unsatisfactory way of life compared with living as a son and heir of God (verse 7).

#### **Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?**

Paul is astonished that believers, who are children of God, can wish they were once again slaves of a religion that consisted of many ceremonies that must be continually observed. (“Wish” is the present tense – they are actually beginning to go back to former habits). That is to exchange the free gift of salvation through faith in Jesus for a hopeless drudgery.

Verse 10

#### **You are observing**

The Greek word used here illustrates the fact that the Galatians were thinking that observance of ceremonial details was more important than spiritual experience. The word means “to watch intently, even superstitiously, for every detail of something”. The same word is used in Luke 6:7 of the Pharisees. Sadly, these believers were becoming like Pharisees.

#### **special days and months and seasons and years!**

By “days” the weekly Jewish Sabbath is meant.

By “months” the Jewish new moon celebrations.

By “seasons” the annual festivals, Passover, Pentecost, tabernacles etc.

By “years” the sabbatical year (7<sup>th</sup>) and the jubilee year (50<sup>th</sup>).

(Compare also Colossians 2:16.)

These are all Old Testament ceremonies, parts of the old covenant, which were mere symbols of Jesus Christ. In the new covenant Jesus gives us spiritual rest; he is our Sabbath. Jesus is the Lamb of God; he is our Passover, etc. Now that Jesus has come and has fulfilled all these symbols by his life, death and resurrection, there is no meaning in celebrating these days as especially sacred and so different from any other days. Christians are now free to worship Christ any day, every day; every day is equally a holy day to New Testament believers.<sup>1</sup>

Verse 11

I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you. Paul was sad to see the Galatian believers lose the joy of the liberty of complete salvation received as a gift from Christ by becoming entangled in a life of “dos and don’ts” to please God themselves as they supposed. If that happened, Paul’s missionary efforts would be wasted. The Galatians would again become slaves to customs instead of believers in Christ. Paul is not, however, saying that the Galatians will go back. He used the Greek word “perhaps”. He hopes his letter will prevent them from going back.



## Summary

The Christian faith is unique. No other religion or philosophy can match it. This is because the faith is given to the believer by God as a free gift. This faith trusts Jesus Christ as being the Saviour, through his death on the cross and then being raised to life. The believer’s sins have been punished and the Holy Spirit has cleansed the person.

This identification with Christ, as God’s Son, brings the privilege of belonging to Christ’s family, the head of which is God the Father. It is a remarkable experience for a person to become a follower of Jesus. That is the glorious gospel, which Paul sets before the Galatian believers at the end of chapter 3 and beginning of chapter 4. Now, do they want to return to the pathetic and miserable ways of slavery, their former way of life before they came to know God in

*Continued on page 4*

<sup>1</sup> The use of the “first day of the week” or “the Lord’s day” for gatherings by the early church was not because that day was the special sign of a covenant, as the Sabbath had been the sign of God’s covenant with Israel, but because it was a regular celebration of Christ’s resurrection.

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a personal way? Their life before was the way of the world, always striving to achieve by human effort. Pursuing life the way of this world’s principles is a waste of time and energy for someone who has found their answer in Christ. Even reliance on the law represents the elements of this world. Following such ways is a denial of Christ and his grace.



## A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

There is material here for a series of sermons to show that all religions are not the same. See the Preachers' Study Papers on Preaching, Study 8, *Planned Preaching*.

### How can you turn back? (Gal. 4:9).

#### Introduction

What makes you afraid?

What made Paul afraid? See verse 11.

Paul’s enemies never caused him to be afraid – e.g. Acts 16:22-25.

But the sight of believers falling into false ways and wrong doctrine brought a fear to the apostle.

- Are we afraid of the things that Paul feared?
- Do we regard spiritual ill health as more frightening than anything else? Compare 3 John 2.

#### 1. The Galatian believers had experienced the knowledge of God in a remarkable way (verse 9).

- (a) God’s Spirit in their hearts brought them to love God (verse 6).
- (b) Christ’s redeeming of them made them heirs of God (verse 7).
- (c) This knowledge had come so unexpectedly through Paul’s sudden arrival to preach the gospel (verse 13). See Acts 13:48,49.

All these things were so beyond the power of the believers to have done for themselves that Paul says: “You know God – **or rather are known by God**” – (verse 9); i.e. It was God who had done these three things for the Galatians, to bring them to belief in him.

*These things are true for every believer today and illustrate God’s election and predestination*

**2. This knowledge of God was something the Galatians had struggled to obtain in other ways and had failed** (verse 8).

- (a) They had been **slaves** (verse 8) to pagan priests, heathen rites and godless customs, all to try and discover God.
- (b) The impossibility of finding God themselves because in fact they were serving evil spirits, who did not have a divine nature (verse 8).
- (c) Their old way of life by observance of religious rules is described (verse 9) as:
  - weak* - because it can never reach a stage of perfection
  - miserable* - because it can never equal the Christian life
  - principles* - because it is to be like infants instead of mature adults (the AV and NKJV<sup>2</sup> translations use the word “elements” which shows this more clearly than the word “principles”).

These things are true for every believer today

**3. Paul is surprised** (verse 9)

that having received what God had done for them, the Galatian believers now wished to return to the old way of trying to justify themselves in God’s sight by keeping special religious ceremonies – “how is it that you are turning back?” See also 1:6; 3:1; 5:7.

- (a) To turn back is surely to insult God, reject his gospel and belittle what great things he had done for them.
- (b) To turn back is surely to become slaves to unprofitable regulations instead of being happy sons of God (verse 7).
- (c) To turn back is to become a hard and critical character, only concerned about ceremonial details – see “observe” (verse 10).
- (d) To turn back is to reject the God-given leadership of apostolic teaching (verse 11).

It ought to surprise us still, if Christians fail to enjoy their faith

**4. Why are believers sometimes tempted to turn back from trusting Christ alone, to observing ceremonies as if they were essential to salvation?**

- (a) It helps us to feel proud of ourselves that we can do something to earn merit from God.
- (b) It is easier to perform a ceremony than continually to live by faith in what Christ has done. Once the ceremony is done, we can forget all about it.

<sup>2</sup> AV is the Authorised Version, known also as the King James Version (1611). NKJV is the New King James version, an update of the AV using current English speech,

- (c) We can enjoy impressing other people by letting them see how well we keep religious ceremonies.
- (d) The doing of a certain number of ceremonies as a regular habit is easier than working out how to behave by biblical truths applied to each situation in life.
- (e) In a world where every other religion teaches that its members must work for their own salvation, it is easy for us to think like everyone else.

We need to beware lest these influences tempt us

**5. What are the remarkable freedoms a believer should enjoy?**

- (a) He is free from worry about the certainty of his salvation for Christ has done everything necessary.
- (b) He is free to come directly to God and know he will be received as a son (verse 7).
- (c) He is free from the poverty of a “weak and beggarly” religion and now enjoys all the spiritual resources and promises of God – “heir” (verse 7).
- (d) He is free at all times to behave in any way that he knows to be **biblically correct**. See 1 Corinthians 9:20-22 as an example of Paul’s exercising freedom. A believer is never free to act unbiblically.

If we are believers we must continually remind ourselves of these freedoms

**Conclusion**

There is a fable of a dog who let go of meat that it was carrying in its mouth in order to snatch at the reflection of it in the water. That is what it is like to turn back to living by religious traditions, ceremonies and customs, instead of by a faith in Christ which seeks to please him in every circumstance.

**NOTE**

The above material could be used as the basis for one sermon. Alternatively, it could be used for five sermons. If the latter is the case, then each point above would be a separate sermon and the following five titles are suggested as suitable for the five sermons:

- 1. What it means to be known of God
- 2. What it means not to know God
- 3. Why it is unwise for Christians to copy unbelievers
- 4. How can we be tempted to turn back?
- 5. What are believers’ privileges?



## Over to you

Does your church celebrate any days in the year as being so special that it could not consider changing or dropping them?

How much do you rely on the weak and miserable principles (elements) of this world? Examine your heart to see how you look upon your relationship with God.

Are there teachings that have come into your region, which emphasise the need of human skill and effort? Maybe they promise some kind of an earthly reward for following their doctrine. Have you been attracted by such teaching and begun to slip back to the way that you were before you became a Christian believer?