

Until Christ Is Formed In You
Galatians 4:8-31
Key Verse: 4:19

"My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you...."

Thus far in the book of Galatians Paul has stressed that we are saved only by faith in Christ, not by observing the law. Although we are saved by faith in Christ, we are still vulnerable to bad influences and false teachings. This is why the Galatians allowed legalism to infest their spirits and their community. So Paul taught them that they needed to grow strong in Christ and his grace until Christ's own image was formed in them. They needed to grow in independent faith which cannot be shaken by the winds of bad influences. Paul was a good shepherd for the Galatians. Paul had great zeal for Christ, and for them. He didn't abandon them even though they treated him like an enemy. Rather, he was willing to suffer even more for them until they grew to maturity. This is the image of Christ, who is our good shepherd. Today let's realize that though we are saved by faith in Christ alone, we need to grow to maturity. And let's learn from Paul how to care for God's children.

I. Paul's zeal for Christ to be formed in the Galatians (8-20)

In verses 8-20 we can see Paul's relationship with the Galatians. In verse 12 he calls them "brothers and sisters," for we are all children of God who cry out to him, "Abba, Father." In verse 19 he calls them, "My dear children." It means that Paul had borne the pains of childbirth for them and was their spiritual mother. On the basis of this relationship, Paul rebuked them (8-11), pleaded with them (12-16), and decided to go through the pains of childbirth all over again until Christ was formed in them (17-20).

First, Paul rebuked them for returning to slavery (8-11). In verses 8-9a Paul reminded them of what kind of slaves they had been, and helped them to see their present situation. Generally, people think that if they believe in God they will lose their freedom and become like slaves. But the opposite is true. When the Galatians did not know God, they were slaves, slaves to those who by nature are not gods (8). They worshiped inanimate objects, such as the sun, moon and stars, mountains, trees and rocks. They also worshiped animals--cows, eagles and snakes--as well as Greek and Roman mythical figures. They feared that if they did not worship these idols, disaster would come upon them. We see remnants of this idolatry even today. Tomorrow is Valentine's Day. One symbol of Valentine's Day is Cupid, the Roman god of desire and erotic love. When he shoots his arrow into a person's heart, that person becomes lovesick and a slave of erotic love. Dr. Tim Keller, in his book, "Counterfeit Gods," has exposed the idolatry of contemporary America: money, sex, power and success. Many in our time have created their own personal idols by mixing elements from various beliefs that support their specific addictions. In fact people are in bondage to forces that make them miserable. Though idols may seem to be nothing, behind them is Satan's power. Those who don't know the true God become slaves of the devil through idols. People abandon God, expecting to be free. But as Romans 1:18-32 tells us, the result is that their thinking becomes futile and their foolish hearts are darkened. They become slaves of evil desires and terrible immorality, and they spawn a totally depraved society.

When the Galatians received the gospel, they escaped from miserable slavery to idols. Verse 9a says, "But now that you know God--or rather are known by God...." Through the gospel they came to know God as their Creator, their Father, and their true object of worship. In God they enjoyed true satisfaction of their souls and real freedom. More fundamentally, they were known by God. It was God who sought them and found them. It was God who took the initiative for their salvation (1 Jn 4:10,19). Now God looked upon them as his dear children with love and affection. This gave them a glorious identity, unshakable security, and an eternal inheritance.

In verse 9b, Paul rebuked them, saying, "...how is it that you are going back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?" Here "weak and miserable forces" refers to the rituals of Judaism, such as observing special days, months, seasons and years (10). Many people think that Christian life is a matter of following rituals. When they follow well, they become proud, self-righteous and argumentative. But when they fail, they despair, fall into condemnation, and lose their joy of life. Jewish ritualism was appealing because it seemed to be Biblical. But actually, it was similar to the bondage they had experienced when they worshiped idols; it was the same bondage but a different form. Paul did not want them to return to slavery and experience the awful consequences of abandoning the living God. So he rebuked them severely out of his great shepherd heart. At the time he rebuked them, Paul felt afraid and had a sense of futility (11).

Sometimes we feel like Paul did. We work hard to serve God's sheep with the word of God, prayers, counseling, delicious food, and so on, so they can grow in Christ. Then, through a false teacher or a bad influence, they suddenly change, becoming crazy. They have become slaves of Satan. By the time we recover from shock, we realize that we are powerless and don't know how to help them. It is easy to give up. What did Paul do?

Second, Paul pleaded to restore their love relationship (12-16). Let's read verse 12a. "I plead with you, brothers and sisters, become like me, for I became like you." Until now Paul had spoken with apostolic authority and given the Galatians sound Biblical doctrine to help them break free from Jewish legalism. But here he pleads with them on the basis of their love relationship. "Plead" means "to appeal earnestly and humbly." Though Paul was a great servant of God, he humbled himself to plead with them. Paul's plea was "become like me, for I became like you...." In the Amplified Bible, this is translated, "...become as I am [free from the bondage of Jewish ritualism and ordinances], for I also have become as you are [a Gentile]."

It was amazing that Paul became like the Gentiles. Before knowing Christ, he was extremely zealous for the traditions of Judaism (1:13:14). At that time he had a typical Jewish prejudice toward Gentiles. But when he came to know God through meeting the Risen Christ, he was set free from Jewish legalism. He found true life, joy and peace. He realized that knowing Christ and helping others to know Christ was everything. He began to put aside any barrier that would hinder others from seeing Christ in him. He became all things to all men in order to win them over to Christ. He said, "To those not having the law, I became like one not having the law...so as to win those not having the law" (1 Cor 9:21). This expressed the incarnation of Christ. Christ left the glorious kingdom of heaven to come into this broken world to become like us. We learn here that shepherds must be humble like Christ and like Paul. We should be able say to those in our mission field, "I became like you." The irony is that the Galatians wanted to be what Paul had been before he knew Christ. So he pleaded with them, "become like me."

Verses 12b-15 reveal the changing nature of the Galatians' attitude toward Paul. When Paul first preached the gospel to them, he was ill. Some people think he had an eye disease. Others say that he contracted malaria as he traveled through the swamp along the coast of Pamphylia. Still others speculate that Paul was epileptic. We don't know what Paul's illness was. But one thing is clear: Paul's physical illness could have been a temptation to the Galatians. They could have seen him with contempt and rejected his message. However, they received Paul as if he were an angel of God. They were even willing to tear out their eyes and give them to Paul. When they received the gospel, Paul's illness did not matter to them. They loved him and respected him and had great joy in Jesus. But when they turned to Jewish legalism, they lost their joy and considered Paul an enemy because he rebuked them with truth to help them to live in Christ's grace (15-16).

Here we learn that our attitude toward shepherds or mentors in Christ is a barometer of our spiritual condition. When we have the gospel in our hearts, we love God's servants even if they have a serious weakness. But if we lose the gospel, our relationship with our shepherds can become very burdensome. Then we become critical; we can even treat them like enemies. At such times, we must stop struggling with people, come back to Christ, and restore our gospel faith. Then our relationships with God's servants will also be restored and we can have peace.

Third, Paul's zeal to win them over to Christ (17-20). In verses 17-20 there is a contrast between the Judaizers and Paul. Both of them had zeal, but their motives and goals were different. In verse 17 Paul exposed the Judaizers' evil motive and purpose. Outwardly they looked noble, spoke well and seemed very pious, quoting many Bible verses, and they were zealous. So people admired them. But their intention was to destroy the love relationship between Paul and the Galatians. They planted doubt about Paul's message, apostleship, and character. Their purpose was to alienate the Galatians from Paul and to make the Galatians their own disciples. When the Galatians heard the Judaizers' teaching, they accepted it without discerning the motive and purpose behind it. They invited bad influence which damaged the work of God among them. We should not be naïve toward impressive looking religious leaders. Rather, we must discern their motive and purpose.

While exposing the evil motive of the Judaizers, Paul was careful to uphold the importance of having zeal. In our Christian life we need zeal. Romans 12:11 says, "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord." God uses those who have zeal. For example, there was Elijah. During King Ahab and Jezebel's reign in Israel, many of God's servants were killed and Baal worship was rampant. Elijah challenged Baal worshipers and won a great victory. He said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty" (1 Ki 19:10). When Jesus was

cleansing the temple, his disciples remembered the words, "Zeal for your house will consume me" (Jn 2:17). In order to do God's work, we need zeal. If we do not have zeal we can become like vegetable people. But we must remember that zeal is not enough. We must also have a right motive and purpose, or we will be harmful.

What was Paul's motive and purpose? Read verse 19. "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you...." Until now, Paul's image was that of a defender of the gospel truth. He was a fighter, a teacher, and a great theologian. But now he reveals a totally different image. Paul uses the metaphor of a mother and her children to express the nature of his relationship with the Galatians. A mother and her child are very attached to each other in love. It is the very nature of their relationship. Mothers bear the pains of childbirth to give life to the child and mothers nurture their children with much sacrifice. Likewise, Paul had borne many pains to preach the gospel to the Galatians. When Paul pioneered the Galatian churches he suffered a lot. Wherever Paul went, the Jews followed him and tried to kill him. On one occasion they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, thinking he was dead. But when his disciples gathered around him, he rose and entered the city again boldly. Then he advised them, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Ac 14:22). Through this kind of pain the Galatian churches were born. Then Judaizers came along and taught another gospel to the Galatians. The Galatians were fascinated by this other gospel. They deserted their shepherd Paul and began to follow the Judaizers. Finally they became slaves of Jewish legalism. When Paul thought about this, it was so painful that he felt like a mother who had a miscarriage. He could have fallen into sorrow and frustration and lost hope. He must have felt betrayed. In that condition many people give up, thinking, "Even though I raise disciples, they will betray me in the end. I don't want to experience that again ever. I am not going to spend my time and energy and life in vain." They become Solomon's disciples and say, "Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless."

Did Paul give up? No. Absolutely not! He said in verse 19, "...I am 'again' in the pains of childbirth...." Paul was ready to go through the same pain all over again. He had "never give up" spirit. Where did this spirit come from? It came from Christ (2:20). Christ's love and mercy and patience were ever real and living in Paul. He said in 1 Timothy 1:16, "But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and have eternal life." When Paul had Christ's mind, he could not give up. Rather, he saw the Galatians with the great affection of Christ. Christ loves us with an undying love, as our true mother (26; cf. Jn 13:1). Just as a true mother never gives up on her children, no matter what their condition or situation, so Paul never gave up on the Galatians. As we know, Monica prayed for her wayward son Augustine for 17 years, shedding many tears. She never gave up on her son. Upon observing her tearful prayers, one nameless bishop remarked, "The child of those tears shall never perish." Indeed, Augustine met Christ personally and became a great servant of God. In the same way, Paul had the heart and mind of a mother for the Galatians.

Paul knew the Galatians' spiritual condition very well. Though they had received Christ as their Savior, they had fallen into Jewish legalism because Christ was not formed in them. They needed to grow in intimacy with Christ until his image was formed in their inner beings. They needed to grow in faith until Christ's reign overpowered all other forces in their lives. Colossians 2:6-7 say, "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness." Ephesians 4:13-15 say, "...until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ." Here we must deeply realize that God's children need to grow spiritually and this process requires spiritual birth pains. We should appreciate those who have borne these pains for us. And we should be willing to bear spiritual birth pains to raise God's children. For how long: "...until Christ is formed in you" (19).

II. "We are children of the free woman" (21-31)

In this part Paul explains that Abraham had two kinds of descendants and that they represent two streams in God's history. He wants to help the Galatians see from God's point of view that they are in the mainstream of God's history. He urges them to cast out legalism, and those who teach it, from their hearts and their community. In verse 21, Paul addresses the legalists. Paul declares that they were ignorant and goes on to explain the spiritual meaning of God's history. Abraham had two sons: Ishmael and Isaac. Though they had the same father, they were different in

nature. Firstly, they had different mothers. Ishmael's mother Hagar was a slave woman. Isaac's mother Sarah was a free woman. So Ishmael was a slave child and Isaac was a free child. Secondly, they were born in different ways. Ishmael was born in the ordinary way. But Isaac was born as the result of a promise, by God's power, through Abraham's faith. (Ro 4:19).

Look at verses 24-26. "These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free and she is our mother." Symbolically, the mothers represent two different covenants. Hagar represents the law, which emphasizes human beings' obligation and duty with words such as "You must do this. You must not do that." The old covenant failed because human beings are paralyzed by sin and cannot obey the law. Sarah represents the new covenant and is a symbol for the heavenly Jerusalem, where God reigns on his throne and his servants are fully transformed into his image. This heavenly Jerusalem is expressed on earth through the Christian church, and is the vessel through which the Holy Spirit works to give new birth to God's spiritual children. The new covenant is different from the old. It is based on the one-sided grace of forgiveness of sins and the promise of God to transform his children on the inside through the work of the Holy Spirit (Lk 22:20; Jer 31:31-34). In the new covenant the Lord says to us, "I paid it all. You only need to believe."

In verse 28, Paul assures the Galatians they are God's children through the promise. They were being persecuted by the Judaizers just as Isaac was persecuted by Hagar. What should they do about it? Look at verse 30. "But what does the Scripture say? 'Get rid of the slave woman and her son...'" (30). Legalism and the gospel cannot coexist. When we compromise with legalism even a little, we lose connection with Christ. Therefore we must dispel legalism thoroughly and live according to the gospel. Paul assures us that we are truly free in Christ as children of the promise (31).

In conclusion, let's read the key verse, verse 19: "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you...." We are inspired by Paul's mother-like heart for the Galatian Christians. In truth, this is God's heart for sinners; it is the heart of our Lord Jesus Christ. God's love never fails and God never abandons his children. In his mercy, God gave his one and only Son Jesus Christ as our Savior. God made Jesus a sacrifice for our sins. Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (Jn 3:16). Our Lord Jesus Christ suffered more than the pain of childbirth on the cross to save us from the power of sin and Satan. Though we betray him, Jesus has mercy on us. Jesus faithfully forgives and restores us, and helps us grow in his image. As we trust in his love alone, Christ is formed in us. We grow in his love toward his dear children. We are willing to suffer the pains of childbirth to save lost souls and raise them until Christ is formed in them. Let's pray to be mature in the love of God so that we may pray with tears, even for those who act like enemies. Amen!