

February 12

Lesson 11

NEW BIRTH

BRINGS FREEDOM

DEVOTIONAL READING: Romans 8:1-11

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Galatians 4

GALATIANS 4:8-20

⁸ Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. ⁹ But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? ¹⁰ You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! ¹¹ I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.

¹² I plead with you, brothers and sisters, become like me, for I became like you. You did me no wrong. ¹³ As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you, ¹⁴ and even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. ¹⁵ Where, then, is your blessing of me now? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. ¹⁶ Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?

¹⁷ Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may have zeal for them. ¹⁸ It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always, not just when I am with you. ¹⁹ My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, ²⁰ how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!



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KEY VERSE

Now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?—Galatians 4:9

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the sole source of true freedom.
2. Explain how reliance on anything other than Christ represents a failure to receive God's message.
3. Write a prayer that thanks God for freedom in Christ.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Freedom in Name Only
- B. Lesson Background

I. Wrong Focus ([Galatians 4:8-11](#))

- A. Witless Slavery ([v. 8](#))
- B. Willing Slavery ([vv. 9, 10](#))
Back-to-Egypt Syndrome?
- C. Wasted Work ([v. 11](#))

II. Uncertain Status ([Galatians 4:12-16](#))

- A. Welcomed in the Past ([vv. 12-14](#))
- B. Doubted in the Present ([vv. 15, 16](#))
Second Impressions

III. Misplaced Eagerness ([Galatians 4:17-20](#))

- A. Harmful Enthusiasm ([v. 17](#))
- B. Healthy Zeal ([v. 18](#))
- C. Heartfelt Longing ([vv. 19, 20](#))

Conclusion

- A. Subtraction by Addition
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Freedom in Name Only

A country is ruled oppressively. One day its people rise up and overthrow the oppressors. To mark a new beginning of freedom, they give their country a new name, perhaps beginning with something like “Democratic Republic of ...”

But in time, oppression returns. The country’s people are as bad off as they were before, if not worse. The country’s new name endures, but only as a mockery of lost ideals. This tragic story has repeated itself too often.

Our text tells an even greater tragedy of lost freedom. It is the account of believers who gave up (or were on the verge of giving up) their freedom in Christ to return to the bondage they knew before having received the gospel.

B. Lesson Background

Our study picks up where last week’s concluded at [Galatians 4:7](#). The letter’s critical tone continues, necessary because of the crisis then at hand. The crisis centered on this question: Should believers in Christ be required to adhere to the requirement of circumcision as set forth in the Law of Moses?

Paul’s opponents answered this with a *yes*, to which Paul counterpunched with the emphatic *no* we saw last week. The stakes were high. If Paul’s opponents prevailed on the issue of circumcision, then imposition of other stipulations in the Law of Moses (Sabbath-keeping, dietary restrictions, etc.) would not be far behind, further negating the sufficiency of Christ’s work.

Judaizers is the term most often used to designate Paul’s opponents in this regard. A Judaizer was someone who (1) adhered to the Jewish way of life and (2) intended to require Gentiles to adopt it as well. Judaizers thought it reasonable that the boundaries of the church should be defined by the rite of circumcision as given to Abraham and his descendants (see [Genesis 17:9-14](#)).

Some students propose that the Judaizers who were creating problems in Galatia were members of the church in Jerusalem, being “some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees” ([Acts 15:5](#)). Having gone on misguided missions to Christians of Gentile background in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, the Judaizers had disturbed and troubled those believers with false teaching (compare [Acts 15:23, 24](#)). They are conjectured to have done the same in Galatia.

Also worthy of consideration is the era of growing Jewish nationalism during which Paul ministered. That was a time when it may have been controversial for Jews to associate with non-Jews (Gentiles). Perhaps some Jews encouraged circumcision of Gentile Christians in order to make it easier for Jewish Christians to fellowship with them without being criticized by nationalists.

In any case, those who insisted on circumcision also presumed that their authority in the matter was greater than Paul’s. This challenge is

discerned from the lengthy defense Paul makes for his apostleship in [Galatians 1:1-2:10](#). Paul referred to his opponents as those who “are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ” (1:7).

I. Wrong Focus

(GALATIANS 4:8-11)

A. Witless Slavery (v. 8)

8. Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods.

Paul offers a reminder to the Galatian Christians of non-Jewish background what their previous lives really were. To have been *slaves to those who by nature are not gods* indicates that those believers had been followers of Greco-Roman religions. As such, they typically would have worshipped various fictitious gods, represented by idols, that were believed to hold power over aspects of the world (see [Acts 17:22-29](#)).

No one loves these gods. But many people fear them, believing they can cause problems for those who displease them. The worshippers’ aim is to appease these gods with regular offerings, which function more as bribes than acts of heartfelt worship. This went hand in hand with being ignorant of the true God. It was a state of enslavement to falsehood. This was the life Gentiles left behind when they believed the gospel.

HOW TO SAY IT

Antioch *An-tee-ock.*

Cilicia *Sih-lish-i-uh.*

Galatians *Guh-lay-shunz.*

Gentiles *Jen-tiles.*

Judaizers *Joo-duh-ize-ers.*

Pharisees *Fair-ih-seez.*

B. Willing Slavery (vv. 9, 10)

9. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?

That life of ignorant enslavement is now past. Galatians who had worshipped false gods now know the one true God through the good news of Jesus. But even better than knowing the true God is being *known by God*. Those formerly alienated from him now belong in truth to God’s true people (compare [1 Corinthians 8:3](#)).

To add circumcision to the gospel would be to return to the past. But how can that be true when the past for the Gentile Christians was not slavery to requirements of the Law of Moses, but to pagan gods? Here we must understand what Paul means by *weak and miserable forces*.

Behind the translations *miserable forces* here and “elemental spiritual forces” in [Galatians 4:3](#) (last week’s lesson) is the same Greek word. We noted in [lesson 10](#) that the word *elemental* in that context means “something that is basic or elementary, such as learning one’s ABCs.” This “something” helps bring a person from an immature state to the intended, fully mature state. Last week’s commentary offered a proposal that Paul refers to the Law of Moses as such a basic element ([Galatians 4:3-5](#)), something to be set aside when maturity comes.

But for Gentiles, Paul sees pagan worship as another kind of basic element. In its falsehood, such worship leaves the person anxious and hungry for the truth. So ironically enough, both the Law of Moses and idolatrous practices belong to the same category of “things followed in the past but now set aside by the good news of Jesus.”

So for Gentile Christians to add circumcision to their faith in Christ is to return to another version of the past that must be left behind. For both Jew and Gentile, that past is not one of freedom and blessing, but of slavery and a curse ([Galatians 3:10](#)). For emphasis, Paul uses two words in the original language to signify *again* in the last line of [verse 9](#).

What Do You Think?

What “weak” things tempt Christians to return to past sin? How do you resist these personally?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding issues of thoughts and attitudes

Regarding issues of acceptable behavior

Regarding manner of speech

BACK-TO-EGYPT SYNDROME?

Many former Soviet satellite countries were set free after the Soviet Union began to collapse in 1989. People rejoiced for a while at their newfound freedom. But when they realized the guaranteed pensions and other Soviet social programs were no longer available to them, they began longing for the “good ol’ days.” This desire encouraged pro-Russian politicians in Ukraine to create conditions that encouraged Russia’s invasion of their country in 2014.

What happened in Ukraine illustrates the tendency to pine for the past when change comes, even if that change was once highly desired. We might dub this the Back-to-Egypt Syndrome, per the desires recorded in [Numbers 14:1-4](#).

Some victims of the false teaching in Galatia (and perhaps even the false teachers themselves) seemed to have felt that way, uneasy with the radical change brought about by the gospel. The temptation to add stipulations from the “tried and true” Law of Moses was very appealing! But that law is analogous to the first stage of a multistage rocket: after that first stage serves its function, it drops away.—C. R. B.

¹⁰. You are observing special days and months and seasons and years!

With circumcision comes the obligation to keep other elements of the Law of Moses. These include observances of the Jewish ritual calendar: weekly Sabbaths, monthly new moon festivals, annual feasts like Passover, and special celebrations such as the year of jubilee. Paul mentions these as elements of the law that pointed to fulfillment in Christ ([Colossians 2:16, 17, 20-22](#)). To obligate oneself to obey these—as if they have something to do with one’s relationship with God—is to reject Christ in favor of things designed to encourage people to look to him.

What Do You Think?

What are some telltale signs that a church’s observances of special times of the year have become stumbling blocks? How do we keep that from happening?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding observances that have a scriptural reference (Christmas, Easter, etc.)
- Regarding secular, cultural observances (Mother’s Day, Independence Day, etc.)
- Regarding events unique to the congregation (anniversaries, etc.)

C. Wasted Work (v. 11)

¹¹. I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.

Paul notes how deeply the Galatian Christians’ actions in this matter are affecting him. The Galatians are his work in the gospel. Their faith in Christ is the fruit of his ministry as a missionary. He is devoting his life to sharing the good news with them and others.

If Paul’s audience, having already placed faith in Christ, make the wrong choice now, they will render Paul’s work to have been wasted. It will be as if he had never preached. The stakes are indeed high in the choice the Galatians must make!

What Do You Think?

What steps can you take to ensure that the work of your spiritual mentors will not be wasted?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In the self-discipline of memory recall
- In modeling aspects of the mentor’s lifestyle
- In becoming a mentor in turn
- Other

II. Uncertain Status

(GALATIANS 4:12-16)

A. Welcomed in the Past (vv. 12-14)

^{12a}. I plead with you, brothers and sisters, become like me, for I became like you.

Persuasion by logic is one thing, and persuasion by example is another. It is to the latter that Paul now turns as he exhorts the Galatians to *become like him*.

His personal example is that of one whose full faith in Christ has resulted in liberation from the strictures of the Law of Moses. In bringing the gospel’s message of liberation to the Galatians, Paul had not parked himself in some seat of authority and insisted people meet various conditions before he would speak with them. Rather, he became as much like the Galatians as possible (*I became like you*) as he sought them out to tell of Jesus. Paul explains this evangelistic principle in more depth in [1 Corinthians 9:19-23](#).

As Paul has accepted fully God’s freedom by faith in Jesus, so should the Galatians. They should not listen to false teachers who try to load on additional requirements such as circumcision.

^{12b, 13.} You did me no wrong. As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you,

Paul refers to a specific experience of weakness when he preached among the Galatians. This passage, like [2 Corinthians 12:7](#), where Paul mentions “a thorn in [his] flesh,” raises questions about his physical condition. Does his mention of *an illness* indicate that he suffers from some chronic condition?

Some have suggested that if Paul is writing to the southern Galatian region after his first missionary journey, then he may be referring to a case of malaria. Such a journey would have taken him through a mosquito-infested region where malaria could have been a danger. Others propose lingering effects from the stoning recorded in [Acts 14:19](#). Yet another proposal is that of an eye disorder, which could be supported by [Galatians 4:15; 6:11](#). Though we do not know the specifics, we do know that Paul experienced some illness while he *first preached the gospel* in Galatia.

^{14.} and even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself.

The result of Paul’s humble approach was to be welcomed by the Galatians. In calling his illness *a trial*, Paul is referring to an occasion of testing. Paul speaks with warm exaggeration of the welcome he received from the Galatians during that testing, comparing their openness to the reception of a supernatural messenger from God. Even more, the Galatians had received Paul as if he were *Christ Jesus himself*! (We assume the welcome did not cross the line into being worship, as in [Acts 14:11-18](#).)

Being now reminded of their joyous reception of the gospel, why would the Galatians even think about giving up the freedom they received in that wonderful moment?

B. Doubted in the Present (vv. 15, 16)

^{15.} Where, then, is your blessing of me now? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.



Visual for Lesson 11. Start a discussion by pointing to this visual as you ask, “What U-turns does the Bible disallow after coming to Christ?”

If the Galatians had received Paul so warmly despite his infirmity, why do they not extend to him the same blessing now? Paul urges the readers to think carefully about what he has meant and should mean to them as the messenger of freedom in Christ. Do the advocates of circumcision add anything to what the Galatians have already received? Certainly not! Adding circumcision actually subtracts from the freedom they have received in the gospel.

The Galatians were at one time ready to make even the extreme sacrifice of their own eyes on Paul’s behalf, because they recognized that he preached the message of true freedom. Why the change in attitude?

What Do You Think?

What sacrificial acts have you seen on the part of fellow Christians? How do these influence you to do likewise?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In making plans ([2 Corinthians 1:15-17](#); etc.)

In changing a practice ([Romans 14:21](#); etc.)

In monetary giving ([2 Corinthians 8:1-4](#); etc.)

Other

16. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?

Paul challenges the Galatians to decide where God's truth lies. Is Christ the fulfillment of what God promised Israel in the law, or is the law the means by which Gentiles join Israel in Christ? Does God bring his promised blessing to the world by receiving people of many nations through Christ, or by making them one nation through circumcision? If the latter are true in these two sets of questions, then Paul has indeed become the Galatians' enemy, for he has preached something false to them. But their entire experience of Paul and of the gospel should indicate the opposite.

SECOND IMPRESSIONS

You never get a second chance to make a good first impression!

The first-second logic of this axiom is airtight. Yet too often we draw wrong conclusions about people because of overreliance on first impressions. Later we may admit to ourselves that our negative first impression was because the other person reminds us of someone we do not like. Perhaps our negative impression was based on something minor, such as the other's use of filler phrases ("you know," "basically," "like," etc.) when speaking.

With the passage of time, however, we may discover the unfairly evaluated person to be "growing on us." We may realize that he or she has qualities that far outweigh whatever caused our initial dislike. The reverse may also be true at times. We may come to regret having formed a business partnership with someone if that partnership was the result of little more than initial positive vibes regarding his or her professional demeanor.

The Galatians accepted Paul warmly when he first brought the gospel. But their relationship with him cooled when his message was challenged by false teachers. Perhaps the Galatians relied too much on first impressions. Paul's letter to the Galatians is, in effect, an invitation to put both Paul and his opponents under the microscope of second, third, and fourth impressions. If they do, only Paul will pass inspection. Anyone can make truth *claims*, but few can pass truth *tests*.—C. R. B.

III. Misplaced Eagerness

(GALATIANS 4:17-20)

A. Harmful Enthusiasm (v. 17)

¹⁷ Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may have zeal for them.

Those who advocate that the Galatian Christians be circumcised are quite enthusiastic. Their message is not complicated: take a painful but permanent step to truly become God's person.

As appealing as such a *zealous* message is, Paul warns that it is not for the good. Whether these teachers realize it or not, their teaching will *alienate*, or separate, the Galatians not merely from Paul himself but from God's people as a whole. To promote circumcision as a necessary religious rite is to reject the sufficiency of Jesus as the one who reconciles people and God. What Paul writes of unbelieving Israel in his letter to the Romans applies to the false teachers in Galatia: "They are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge" ([Romans 10:2](#)).

B. Healthy Zeal (v. 18)

¹⁸ It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always, not just when I am with you.

Only one kind of enthusiasm is worthwhile: that of constant dedication to what is *good*. Of course, the good news of Jesus is the greatest good thing. The Galatians need to remember their initial enthusiasm for the gospel. The aim is not simply to recapture the emotion of that time but to refocus on the message that they received, remaining committed to its truth regardless. The Galatians demonstrated that enthusiasm when Paul was present. Now they need to do the same in his absence. God has provided them with what they need to remain faithful, whether or not Paul is present for their support.

What Do You Think?

What steps can you take to ensure that your zeal for Christ has scriptural truth as its basis?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Considering positive biblical precepts and examples ([John 2:17](#); [Romans 12:11](#); [2 Corinthians 7:7](#); [8:10-12](#); etc.)

Considering negative biblical precepts and examples ([Ecclesiastes 7:16, 17](#); [Romans 10:2](#); [Philippians 3:6](#); etc.)

C. Heartfelt Longing (vv. 19, 20)

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

The expression *my dear children* stresses the close bond that Paul has with those who have come to faith through his ministry (compare [1 Corinthians 4:14, 15](#); etc.). Here he carries that figure of speech in a special direction. Paul's efforts in preaching to the Galatians, combined with the suffering that he experienced through his physical malady and otherwise, had been like labor pains that yielded the Galatian Christians' birth into God's family through faith in Christ.

Now the Galatian Christians are in a struggle to hold to that faith. To receive circumcision on the terms offered them would be to say that Christ was not enough to bring them into God's people. Paul's struggle to demonstrate this is like a second set of labor pains to him. When his desire that *Christ be formed in* them is accomplished, their lives will be centered on and governed by the Savior, not the law's requirement for circumcision. His willingness to undergo such a struggle demonstrates the depth of his conviction about the sufficiency of the gospel and the extent of his commitment to them.

20. how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!

Paul's letter to the Galatians represents his additional "pains of childbirth" on their behalf. But better still would be another personal visit. The goal of such a visit would be for Paul to be able to change his tone of voice to be softer than that of the letter. That could happen if face-to-face interaction reveals or results in the Galatians' rejection of the false teaching and teachers in view. Whether Paul ever has the opportunity to make this personal visit depends on when this letter is dated.

Conclusion

A. Subtraction by Addition

We may look back on the Galatians' situation with bemusement. Why was circumcision so attractive to them? Why would they consider adding such a thing to their faith in Christ?

Those questions should make us ponder what we ourselves might add to faith in Christ as we consider what makes us God's people. In every place and age, some have sought to add to the gospel in ways that ultimately result in diminishing the freedom the gospel gives. If we are to be truly free in Christ, then he and he alone must be the object of our trust.

B. Prayer

Father, may we depend utterly on what your Son has done to free us from sin. Teach us to rely on him alone. We pray this in his name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Adding requirements to the gospel always results in subtracting from the gospel.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

On the board write, "*There ought to be a law against ...*"

Spend a few minutes allowing your class to create a list that finishes the statement. Encourage responses from the most serious to the silliest. Some examples might be:

- ... mowing one's lawn before 9 a.m. on Saturday.
- ... loud, personal cell phone calls in public.
- ... smoking where children are present.
- ... saying "There ought to be a law against ..."

After creating the list, ask students to tell what problems might arise if there *were* a law such as one described on the list.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "Would You Rather ..." activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students discuss their choices in pairs.

After either activity, lead into Bible study saying, "An interesting aspect of human nature is that we often want maximum freedom for ourselves, yet we want maximum control for others. But life does not work that way! We end up having to choose to sacrifice a part of our freedom for some degree of security. But when does freedom become anarchy or order become bondage? That is the big question Paul had for the church in Galatia."

Into the Word

Say, “The Socratic teaching method is named after the classical Greek philosopher Socrates. It is a teaching method based on asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking. Paul did not hesitate to ask some pointed, hard questions of the Galatian Christians.”

Divide the class into three groups. Give each group a section of the Bible text. Instruct the groups to read their sections and write questions that would help people understand what Paul was saying about freedom and legalism in these verses. The verse divisions and a few sample Socratic questions follow:

Group 1—Galatians 4:8-11.

What do people worship before they learn of the God of the Bible? Why would anyone who has tasted religious freedom return to legalism? How do people overemphasize special days and seasons in a religious sense?

Group 2—Galatians 4:12-16.

Why would Paul speak of his weakness rather than his authority in convincing the Galatians to be free in Jesus? In what way is accepting legalistic practices an insult to those who have taught us the gospel of grace?

Group 3—Galatians 4:17-20.

How do people let the personal characteristics and status of teachers influence their own faith and faithfulness? What is the risk of telling others of your faults of faith? How are learners sometimes fooled by the zealotry of false teachers?

Into Life

Say, “In 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke of four freedoms that should belong to everyone in the world. He suggested that those freedoms could be obtained through political means.” Those freedoms are:

- Freedom of speech
- Freedom from want
- Freedom of worship
- Freedom from fear

Video of Roosevelt listing those freedoms is available on video-sharing websites such as YouTube, should you wish to play it for the class.

Discuss whether or not class members agree that these four freedoms are basic and can be obtained. Ask, “What would Paul say? How do cultural views of the four differ from the biblical view?”

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Four Freedoms” activity from the reproducible page. Since freedom in Christ is the theme of next week’s lesson, you may encourage class members to take the page home and complete it in preparation for that lesson.