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Galatians

I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain. Galatians 4:11

Paul's words of this verse are a pitiful cry from a disturbed heart, something which has been echoed countless times since by faithful pastors and teachers around the world. Martin Luther goes so far as to say, "These words of Paul breathe tears."

He had labored for the church at Galatia, bringing them to Christ and then instructing them about their new life in Christ. However, the Judaizers had crept in and stolen the hearts of the Galatians away from that simple, beautiful gospel message. This sad note from Paul says nothing about salvation; that is a done deal for those who have received Christ.

Rather, this letter speaks of right doctrine and holding steadfastly to the soundness of that doctrine. If one turns from the truth of the gospel, they will only find themselves stuck in bondage. And those who follow after them will never come to a saving knowledge of Christ. Paul's very heart was tied up in what was occurring in Galatia and he felt almost helpless concerning the situation.

If they didn't see reason, all of his efforts would have been "in vain." However, those in Galatia were not the only ones that Paul stressed over. Like a father tending to his children, he felt the same concern for his other churches. Two prominent examples are -

"Do all things without complaining and disputing,¹⁵ that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,¹⁶ holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain." Philippians 2:14-16

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"For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain." 1 Thessalonians 3:5

Any decent, caring pastor will agonize over the loss of any of his flock to bad doctrine. He will shake his head and ask, "How could this have happened." Even if much effort is placed in the training of his flock, the weakness in some individuals cries out for bondage and someone to control them. They would rather be in chains to the law and under the harsh thumb of legalists than to live freely in the simplicity of the gospel of Christ.

Life application: If you have a pastor who truly cares about the doctrine you accept, you should be grateful for that, and also understand that he probably spends much time in anguish over you when you suffer through ills, trials, or even the self-inflicted wounds of bad doctrine.

Brethren, I urge you to become like me, for I *became* like you. You have not injured me at all. Galatians 4:12

There are a multitude of interpretations of what Paul is stating here, but it really shouldn't be that confusing. He is a Jew and he has been telling the Galatians that the law cannot save anyone. Instead, he gave several logical reasons why the law was introduced. He then went on to show that its purpose had been served and it was nullified through the work of Christ. He understood this and gave up on the law as a means of obtaining righteousness and being justified before God. He is now asking them to do the same.

"Brethren" means that they are, in fact, brethren. They have not lost their salvation if they were saved, but they sure will lose their joy as they live out their lives in bondage under the law. Further, those who come after them will never come to a saving knowledge of Christ because they will be trained in works and not in faith.

"I urge you to become like me." Paul is shouting out to them, "I gave up on the law. I counted my Jewish-ness as nothing. My life as a Pharisee seeking righteousness under the law is now behind me. I live for Christ and place my life and my fate in His capable hands alone."

"For I *became* like you." Paul had given up all of those things he once boasted in. Instead, he notes that "I took up life with Gentiles and have lived as one not under the law. I showed you that through faith in what Jesus did, you are reconciled to God. As I was like you, then why would you try to change now? You received the Spirit in the condition that you were in as a Gentile. Be pleased to live your life as one now."

"You have not injured me at all." Of this clause, Vincent's Word Studies notes -

"This translation misses the force of the aorist, and conveys a wrong impression, that Paul, up to this time, had received no wrong at the hands of the Galatians. This was not true. The reference is to his earlier relations with the Galatians, and is explained by Galatians 4:13, Galatians 4:14. Rend. ye did not injure me at all. Ye did not injure me then, do not do so now."

Paul is telling them that by placing themselves under the law, it would become a source of true pain for them. He is asking them to not do this insane thing and take on the yoke of bondage which Christ had paid the price to remove.

Life application: If Christ fulfilled the law, paying its price in full, then our taking on the law now can only be a giant affront to Him. It is saying, "I don't trust that what

You did was sufficient to save me. I will establish my own righteousness apart from Your work. I don't need what You offer." What a slap in the face of the Lord!

You know that because of physical infirmity I preached the gospel to you at the first. Galatians 4:13

Paul now brings to memory the reason for his having "preached the gospel to" them "at the first." His first visit is recorded in Acts 16:6, and a second visit was made in Acts 18:23. His bringing up that first visit is his way of getting them to recall what it was like to have been brought into the body of Christ, and the surrounding circumstances which occurred at that time. In doing this, he is trying to get them to see the contrast in how he handled things in comparison to how the Judaizers were handling them now.

And so he first reminds them that they were fully aware of the fact that his preaching the gospel to them was "because of physical infirmity." Scholars look to a host of possibilities as to what he means by this. Some find it referring to the contemptible nature of his presence. He was not a skilled orator and he was not flashy in the conduct of his life. In contrast, the Judaizers would be well-skilled in their presentation. Thus, they could compare themselves as superior to "that wretched Paul."

Others see this as referring to his sufferings for the gospel in general. He was beaten, persecuted, and maligned. This is what drove him into the area of Galatia and brought the gospel to them. Another scholar sees the infirmity not in Paul, but in the Galatians. They knew nothing of the law or of Christ, and so Paul thus accommodated himself in preaching the gospel to them in a manner which they would understand. His approach concerning salvation by grace through faith came in a simple and understandable form. In contrast would be the Judaizers who were forcing the law back on them.

Another option is that Paul suffered an affliction in his body which necessitated his stopping at Galatia to recover from it or to be assisted through it. This final

thought seems the most likely based on the coming verses. They continue in this same line of reasoning, and so there seems to be no reason to suggest it is one of the other possibilities.

Life application: Sometimes when we are helping a Christian who is struggling with turning to legalism, we may be able to take them back to their own beginnings with Christ. If we can get them to remember what their initial conversion was like, then they can begin to rightly process what it means to be saved. Too much head knowledge in one area (which may lead to legalism) can often overwhelm the truth of the basic doctrines of Christ (such as salvation by grace through faith).

And my trial which was in my flesh you did not despise or reject, but you received me as an angel of God, *even* as Christ Jesus. Galatians 4:14

There is a dispute between manuscripts as to whether Paul's words actually say "my trial" or "your trial." Assuming that it is "my trial," then he is acknowledging that his weakness and his infirmity, which was in his physical body, were not to be considered by the Galatians as points of rejecting him. They overlooked this failing aspect of his humanity and they responded in a completely different way than might otherwise be expected.

If it is correctly rendered "your trial," it doesn't change the overall outcome of the verse, but it would mean that Paul's weakness was actually a trial to the Galatians. He was probably even burdensome to them because of the care that he needed. And yet they responded favorably to him, assuming all of the burdens that the affliction brought about.

Either way, the Galatians "did not despise or reject" him because of his bodily afflictions. Instead, they received him "as an angel of God." An angel of God doesn't have such afflictions. Rather, they are heavenly beings and would bring a blessing rather than a trial. Instead of rejecting Paul, they accepted him in a grand manner, as if he were such a heavenly being.

But even more, he adds to the superlative nature of his treatment by next stating, "...*even* as Christ Jesus." Their care of Paul was so tender and affectionate that he looks back on it as worthy of the treatment someone would have afforded to even the Lord Himself. Although under a different dispensation, and under a different context, the words of Christ Jesus in Matthew 10:40 are reflected here -

"He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me."

Finally, this verse shows us the superiority of Christ over the angels, a thought which is explicitly stated in Hebrews 1:4.

Life application: How is it that we treat those who carry the message of Christ? Do we treat them like anyone else, overlooking their plight when they are in a state of weakness or need? Paul said to his protégé Timothy that we are to, "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine." The Galatians treated Paul this way even before he was considered a spiritual authority. They received him in with gladness and then received his message with joy. As believing Christians, let us remember to treat our fellow Christians as worthy of all respect. Further, let us remember to doubly honor those who share their knowledge of Christ with us.

What then was the blessing you *enjoyed*? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me.

Galatians 4:15

Paul now asks a simple question based on the previous verse. He had just noted that he was received "as an angel of God, *even* as Christ Jesus." They were overjoyed at Paul's coming and the good news that he bore, telling them of the forgiveness of sin through the Person and work of Christ. But with the coming of the Judaizers, this had changed. These false teachers had twisted the gospel, and they had torn the Galatians sense of joy towards Paul away.

And so he asks, "What then was the blessing you *enjoyed*?" The word "what" is translated by other texts as "where," and seems to convey the idea better. They had a sense of joy in Paul which had now departed. In other words, it is not that joy itself had been taken from them, just joy in Paul. He was the messenger of the gospel and they were blessed when he was there. Now, it is as if he had become an enemy to them. This is seen in his next words, "For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me."

Paul came to them first "because of physical infirmity." At that time, and upon reception of the good news, they would have done anything for him. They were simply overjoyed to have him among them. In order to show the level of love that they felt for him, he reminds them of their willingness to care for him, saying, "...you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me."

These words can be taken in one of two ways. The first is that this is an idiom showing that they would have given to him even their most precious body parts as an offering. The eyes are used this way elsewhere in the Bible. The other possibility is that Paul's malady was an affliction of the eyes and so he was saying that they were so grateful to him that if they could, they would give him their good eyes in place of his failing eyes.

What is probable is that both are correct. It is true that the eyes are most precious. It is also true, from several other passages in the New Testament that Paul appears to have had an affliction of the eyes. While standing in the same room as the high priest, he claimed he didn't know who he was. He is guided by others in the book of Acts, a sign that he probably had bad eyes. He signed his letters with unusually large handwriting, something someone with bad eyes would do. Such clues point to Paul's eyes as being a source of affliction.

Whether as an idiom, or as a statement of heartfelt intent, Paul reminds them of the joy they once had for him because of the message he carried. Now that message had been tainted and the joy they held for the messenger had been robbed away.

Life application: People get upset and leave churches over the pettiest of issues. They will throw away years of sound instruction and effort by the pastor over one little slip. They forget that he is merely a human doing his best, but still fallible. And they forget that they too are full of failings that he has had to deal with, usually at the expense of his own personal life. The lesson of the Galatians is one which is still being learned today, and it is a sad one.

Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth? Galatians 4:16

When Paul had first visited them, they displayed amazing and wonderful affection on him. This was noted in his words of the previous two verses. Now however, it is as if he had become an enemy to them. Vincent's Word Studies notes that the word "enemy" is given "in an active sense, as is shown by the next clause. Not passive, an object of hatred, which would have the pronoun in the dative."

In other words, it wasn't as if they hated him, but that they looked at him as someone fighting against them. They had been duped by the Judaizers into believing that his gospel message was false, even a heresy. How sad it is to think that it is they, the ones who would so pervert the grace of Christ, who were teaching heresy.

Unfortunately, this is exactly how false teachers, and the leaders of aberrant cults, work. They divide and conquer; they find an enemy in every good teacher; and they twist the truth, stating that what is incorrect is what is necessary for right living. In Paul's case, they warned against him, not because he was a false teacher, but because he told the truth.

What is so immensely sad is that unlike the Galatians, we now have the truth of the gospel written down for us. If someone is confused about which teacher is telling the truth, all they need to do is pick up the Bible and read it. The answers are there. But even this approach is called into question. Paul's words are maligned. Sometimes, people claim that his words were manipulated by an ancient conspiracy and that they are not what he originally wrote.

By some, it is said that his words can only be properly understood when taken from a Jewish perspective. By others, it is said that the Greek translation has been corrupted. On and on the lies go, deceiving people into believing that the law must be adhered to in one form or another. But even Peter warned against this for those willing to listen -

"Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; ¹⁵ and consider *that* the longsuffering of our Lord *is* salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, ¹⁶ as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable *people* twist to their own destruction, as *they do* also the rest of the Scriptures." 2 Peter 3:14-16

Life application: Pick up the Bible and read it for yourself. Accept the truth that God has not allowed His word to be so utterly corrupted that it can no longer be trusted. Stop listening to Judaizers who are filled with wickedness and lies concerning the grace of God in Christ. Trust Christ, not your own worthless attempt at pleasing God through an obsolete law.

They zealously court you, *but* for no good; yes, they want to exclude you, that you may be zealous for them. Galatians 4:17

Paul has been speaking on the same subject throughout the entire epistle. A group of self-serving miscreants that we today call "Judaizers" had come in and perverted the pure gospel which Paul had presented to the Galatians. They had joyfully accepted Paul's words and were adopted into the family of God, having received His Spirit in the process. Now things had changed.

This group of self-serving people had arrived on the scene and affected the minds of the Galatians to the point where they were now inserting precepts of the law

into their lives instead of relying on the grace that had saved them in the first place. And so Paul, referring once again to these false teachers says, "They zealously court you." The word is *zélóó* and it is rightly translated as "zealously." There was fervency in their efforts of courting the Galatians. However, their zeal was "for no good."

Instead, their goal was that "they want to exclude you." In order to bring them into bondage to their false teaching, they worked to draw them away from the true gospel. Thus, they would be excluded from fellowship with true believers, excluded from further proper doctrine and training by Paul and the other apostles, and excluded from rewards for faithful adherence to Christ. Only harm could result from this infection which was brought in by these false teachers.

Instead of building them up and making them zealous for the gospel, for right doctrine, and for the grace of Christ, they courted them that they "may be zealous for them." Paul uses the same word, *zélóó*, in order to show the misguided nature of what had occurred. The false teachers had selfish motivations, just like any cult does. The intent was to get hearts and minds off of Christ and the gospel and towards their own twisted and perverted selves.

It is unfortunate that some translations use two different words to translate the one word *zélóó*. In doing so, they miss the contrasting stress of Paul's words of this verse. One such example is from the KJV -

"They zealously affect you, *but* not well; yea, they would exclude you, that ye might affect them."

As you can see, the full force of Paul's intent is diminished through such an unhappy translation.

Life application: It doesn't take long to recognize an aberrant cult if looked at from objective eyes. They have several common traits such as claiming exclusive

knowledge of the truth. They twist and manipulate Scripture for their own agenda. They deride those who would dare question their authority, etc. Unfortunately, when people lack sound doctrine, they wind up in cults because they had no firm footing on which to stand. Paul's letter is intended to correct the faulty thinking of the Galatians. We now have it as a part of the full counsel of God. Be sure to read the Bible, study it, and apply its precepts properly to your life.