

Galatians: DON'T SUBMIT AGAIN TO THE SLAVE'S YOKE

by Ray C. Stedman

In many ways Galatians is the most colorful epistle in the New Testament. It is filled with vivid and vigorous language. If you have read it, I am sure that you were struck by its forcefulness.

In looking at any individual book of the Bible, it is worthwhile to consider where and how it fits into the whole. Let's review the overall structure, then, before beginning this study of the message in Galatians. We can first divide the Bible according to its natural divisions of Old and New Testament to find out what each testament contributes to the supreme message of the Scripture. That central message, essentially, is that the whole revelation of God -- the entire Bible in other words -- is given so that we might be complete human beings in Christ. That is its aim. The Bible was given so we might experience all God intended for man in the beginning, wholly filled and flooded with God himself.

To this end the Old Testament contributes the theme of preparation, the groundwork. The New Testament contributes the note of realization. It actually confronts us with the person of Jesus Christ, who is himself God's program and plan for making life complete for us.

As you may recall, there are several divisions within the New Testament. The Gospels and the Book of Acts present Jesus Christ to us. Each Gospel gives a different aspect of his life. Acts ties these gospel presentations of Christ to his present manifestation in the world today, in his body, the Church. This is Christ at work. Christ in human life.

Next, the Epistles give us the explanation of Jesus Christ -- his person, his work and their significance -- all spelled out for us so that we might understand and grasp them. The Epistles are further divided into three major groups. The first four -- Romans, First and Second Corinthians, and Galatians -- express the truth "Christ in us" -- what it means to have Jesus Christ living in us.

The second division, encompassing the rest of the Epistles through Philemon, gathers around the theme, "you in Christ" -- the significance of the fact that we are made part of his body. These Epistles explain the work of the Church and the proper life of the Church.

The third group, beginning with the letter to the Hebrews and including those to James, Peter, John and Jude, are the letters which describe the operative word "faith" -- what faith is, how it works, why it suffers, and what it faces in life. Faith is the means by which all that Christ is in us and all that we have in him are made manifest in our experience.

The last division of the New Testament is the book of Revelation, standing by itself as the great consummation of what Christ has come into the world to do. It describes for us the great scene when all will be ended and the work of redemption is accomplished. This, in brief, relates the study of Galatians we are now beginning to the Bible as a whole.

You who have read this little letter carefully will have noticed that it is very closely related to the epistles to the Romans and to the Hebrews. These three letters of the New Testament form what might be regarded as an inspired commentary on a single verse from the Old Testament book of Habakkuk. It was to that Old Testament prophet that God gave the great truth, "the righteous shall live by his faith," {Hab 2:4 RSV}. All three of these letters quote this verse, "The just [or the righteous] shall live by faith." It is interesting that each of them shows a different aspect or gives a different emphasis to the verse. In Romans the emphasis is put on the words, "the righteous." Paul details what it means to be righteous, how a man becomes justified before God and declared righteous in Christ. It was this epistle that finally delivered Martin Luther from a terrible legalism. Then, in Galatians, the emphasis is upon the words "shall live" -- what it means to live as a righteous person, justified in Christ. This is the letter about liberty which is the fullest expression of life. Finally, in Hebrews, you find the last two words, "by faith," emphasized. This is the great letter on faith, culminating in

that memorable section in chapter 11, called "the heroes of faith."

Galatians comes to grips with the question of what real Christian life is like. The answer can be characterized by one word, "liberty." The Christian is called to liberty in Jesus Christ. The cry of this epistle is that Christians might discover the liberty of the sons of God in accordance with all that God has planned for man in the way of freedom and enjoyment. Its aim is freedom of our human spirits to the utmost extent, restrained only as necessary for us to exist in harmony with the design of God. Therefore, this letter has been called the "Bill of Rights of the Christian Life," or the "Magna Carta of Christian Liberty," the "Emancipation Proclamation" from all forms of legalism and bondage in the Christian experience.

In the introduction of the letter we read:

Paul an apostle -- not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead -- and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia: {Gal 1:1-2 RSV}

This is not a letter written to a single church as in the cases of those to Corinth and Ephesus. This is a letter addressed to a number of churches. Who were these Galatians? If you read the thirteenth and fourteenth chapters of the book of Acts you will discover the background of these churches. They were churches begun by Paul when he was on his very first missionary journey, traveling with Barnabas into the cities of Antioch, Iconium, Derbe, and Lystra. In Lystra, on one occasion, he was stoned and dragged outside the city and left for dead after having first been welcomed and treated as a god. In all these cities he experienced persecution. These were the cities of Galatia.

The name of the province comes from the same root as the word Gaul. Any of you who took Latin in school remember that you began your reading of Julius Caesar with the words, *Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres*: "Gaul as a whole is divided into three parts." Gaul is the ancient name for France. About 300 years before Christ some Gauls from what is now France had invaded the Roman Empire and sacked the city of Rome. Then they crossed into northern Greece and continued across the Dardanelles straits into Asia Minor. At the invitation of one of the kings of the area, these Gauls settled there.

So they were not Arabs or Orientals but a Celtic race, of ancestry similar to that of the Scots, the Irish, the Britons, and the French. Since many Americans are also of that ancestry, this letter is particularly pertinent to us, as you will recognize when you read Julius Caesar's description of the Gauls: "The infirmity of the Gauls is that they are fickle in their resolves, fond of change and not to be trusted." Or, as another ancient writer put it, "They are frank, impetuous, impressionable, eminently intelligent, fond of show but extremely inconstant, the fruit of excessive vanity." Doesn't that sound like Americans? Most of the world would agree to that.

On his second journey, this time with Silas instead of Barnabas, Paul set out to go back through these Galatian cities and visit the churches that had been established, and on this occasion he stayed a considerable time in various cities because he became sick. He refers to this illness in a rather oblique manner in this letter. Evidently it was some kind of serious eye trouble, for he says to these Galatians,

For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me. {Gal 4:15 RSV}

Some Biblical scholars feel that he had inflamed, pus-filled eyes that made him almost repulsive at times.

But these Galatians, as Paul admits in this letter, received him with great joy, treating him as though he were an angel of God, or even Christ Jesus himself. They reveled in the gospel of grace that he brought because he had set forth for them, with amazing vividness, the glory and the work of the crucified Lord. They had entered thereby into the fullness of life in the Spirit and had received the love, joy and peace that Jesus Christ, entering the heart, gives.

But when he wrote this letter, probably from the city of Corinth, something had happened. Certain people, whom Paul labels in another place "wolves in sheep's clothing," had come among them; certain Judaizers had

come down from Jerusalem with what Paul calls an alien gospel -- not a totally different gospel, but a perversion of the true Gospel. To these Gentile believers in Jesus Christ in the freshness of their new-found faith, the Judaizers were declaring that in order to grow and really become genuine Christians the Gentiles would have to become circumcised, keep the law of Moses, and obey all the Old Testament ritual. These legalists were trying to impose all the restrictions and the ceremonial obligations of the law of Moses.

Now, they hadn't set Jesus Christ aside -- very few gospels that have any chance of spreading ever do that. But the Lord was given second place and keeping the law was made paramount. Furthermore, the Judaizers challenged the apostolic authority of the Apostle Paul. They pointed out that he was independent, very undependable, overly enthusiastic, and he had graduated from the wrong seminary. So they were trying to get the Galatians to reject his authority as an apostle.

Paul was greatly disturbed by this news. As you read this letter you can see that he is moved and agitated to the utmost. Listen to some of the expressions he uses. In verse eight of the first chapter we read,

But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. {Gal 1:8 RSV}

Or, to put it bluntly, as Paul actually said, "let him be damned." And he repeats it again: "If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be damned," {cf, Gal 1:9b RSV}. He was not merely hurling acrimonious challenges or insults here. He was simply facing the fact than anybody who comes with a different gospel has already damned himself. He hasn't found the truth. Those apart from Christ are accursed, as the apostle makes clear not only in this letter, but in many others.

At the close of the letter his emotions are stirred again and he is greatly concerned about these people who are preaching circumcision and the bearing in the flesh of the marks of the law. He says,

I wish those who unsettle you would mutilate themselves! {Gal 5:12 RSV}

Literally, he says, "let them emasculate themselves!" Since they are so zealous in trying to get some mark in the flesh on you," he says, "I wish they would go all the way and emasculate themselves!"

You can see now some of the fire that flashes throughout this letter. The apostle is deeply disturbed. He is wearing his war paint and wastes no time with pleasantries or personal greetings. He moves right to the matter at hand with vigor and vehemence. He can't even wait for his secretary. As he tells us in the later part of the letter, he painfully scratches it all out in large letters, in his own handwriting, despite his poor eyesight.

What is the theme of the letter? What has him so upset? This is the theme of Galatians:

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father. {Gal 1:3-4 RSV}

What has disturbed him is that this perverted gospel, this legalistic approach to Christianity is concealing the two great truths that are inherent in the gospel -- the true gospel. First, Christ gave himself for our sins: that is justification. Second, he gave himself to deliver us from this present evil age: that is sanctification. All of it is by grace and not by works. It is the assault upon these truths that has so deeply disturbed the apostle. He knows that anything that challenges them is a false gospel that will lead its victim into heartache, bondage, desolation of spirit and ultimately to spiritual death. So he is disturbed.

Let's take a more detailed look at these two great truths which provide the basic outline of the letter. In the first four chapters he handles the great matter of justification by faith. Christ died for our sins. He gave himself for our sins. That is, of course, the basic declaration of the Gospel, the good news that Christ has borne our sins. That is always good news. Therefore Paul spends the first chapter defending this good news. First he shows that it was revealed by Jesus Christ directly to him. He didn't get it from any man, not even from the apostles. Christ himself appeared to him and told him this good news.

Second, it was acknowledged by the other apostles as being the same that they had received. This, by the way, is one of the answers to what is called hyper-dispensationalism in our day. There are certain persons who claim that Paul had a different gospel than Peter, James, and John and the others -- that his gospel is superior to theirs. But Paul himself in this letter says that when at last, fourteen years after his conversion, he went up to Jerusalem and had an opportunity to compare notes with the other apostles, they were amazed to discover that this man, who had never been a part of the original twelve, knew as much about the truth of the Gospel as they did.

In fact, he knew what went on in the secret, intimate gatherings that they had with the Lord Jesus Christ. You can see an example of this in First Corinthians, where the apostle is speaking of the Lord's Supper. He says,

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, ...
{1 Cor 11:23-24a RSV}

How did Paul know that? Well, he said, "I received it from the Lord Jesus." When Peter, James and John heard that this man knew as much about what went on in that upper room as they did, they recognized that here indeed was a man called of God. His apostleship rested upon that fact.

Third, it was not only revealed to him by Christ and acknowledged by the other apostles, but it had been vindicated when Peter came to Antioch. Peter, the one who was supposedly the head of the apostles, was in error in Antioch. You can read the story in chapter two. The difficulty was over the matter of eating kosher versus Gentile foods. Peter had been a Jew, raised to eat nothing but kosher foods, but when he became a Christian he ate with the Gentiles and thus indicated the liberty that he had in Christ. But then, when certain men came down from Jerusalem, he began to compromise and went back to eating only with Jews, thus denying the very liberty that he had formerly proclaimed. This is what stirred Paul up and he withstood Peter to his face. Think of that! This maverick apostle challenged Peter to his face. He vindicated the Gospel as he did so.

Then he goes on to show us, first, that the Gospel is salvation by faith and not by works. The Gospel is of salvation by faith in the work of one who has already done it all, not by the works that we ourselves employ. Second, it was by promise and not by law. Abraham was given the promise four hundred years before the Law was given. The law, therefore, cannot change the promise. The promise of God stands true whether the law comes in or not. Further, he shows that those who are in Christ are sons, not slaves. They are no longer servants but they are part of the family of God. In this connection he deals with the great allegorical passages concerning Hagar and Sarah, the law and the mount of grace (Jerusalem above). From these passages he declares the great fact of justification by faith.

Now all that is wrapped up in that little phrase, "who gave himself for our sins." Jesus Christ has paid the price himself. He didn't send an angel...

No angel could our place have taken,
highest of the high tho' he.
The one who on the cross was forsaken,
was one of the Godhead three.

It was this truth that delivered the soul of Martin Luther. More than 450 years ago the monk of Wittenberg strode up and nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door of the castle church and thereby began what we call the Protestant Reformation. Here was a man who had tried his very level best to find his way to heaven according to the pathway of works. He had done everything the church of his day suggested. He had tried fasting, indulgences, the sacraments, the intercession of the saints, penances, and confessions. He had endured long night vigils and heavy days of labor. He had done everything he could, but the harder he worked, the more his inner distress increased.

Then, absolutely desperate, he went to the head of the Augustinian Order, of which he was a monk, and asked for some kind of release. The dear old man, not knowing very much, told him all that he could. He said, "Put

your faith not upon yourself but in the wounds of Christ." Then a dim ray of light began to break through into Martin Luther's soul. But it wasn't until he was in his little room in the tower preparing lectures on the Psalms for his students that the full light began to break. He was struck by a verse in the Psalms that said,

... in thy righteousness, deliver me! {Psa 31:1 RSV}

This gripped Martin Luther's heart because the righteousness of God was to him a terrible thing -- that unbendable righteous judgment by which God would destroy everyone who failed in the least degree to measure up to the full expectation of the holiness of God. Luther said that he even hated the word "righteousness."

But then, as he began to investigate the word, it led him to the Epistle to the Romans where he read the words, "The righteous shall live by faith," {Rom 1:17b}. That struck fire in his heart and he saw for the first time that another had paid the penalty. Christ himself had entered the human race and borne the guilt of our sins so that God might, in justice, accept us -- not on our merits, but on his. When that truth broke upon Martin Luther's heart, he was never the same man again. It led him to challenge the system of indulgences and all the other legalistic bondage of the Roman Church and caused him at last to nail the Theses to the door.

It is interesting, as someone has pointed out, that every single religion known to man is a religion of works -- except the Gospel of Jesus Christ! Hinduism tells us that if we renounce the world and relate ourselves to the "spirit of the universe," we will at last find our way to peace. Buddhism sets before us eight principles by which man is to walk and thus find himself on the way to salvation. Judaism says we must keep the Law absolutely and inflexibly and then we will be saved. Islam says that a man must pray five times a day and give alms and fast on the month of Ramadan and obey the commands of Allah. All are ways of works. Unitarianism says that man is saved by having good character. Modern humanism says salvation is by service to mankind. But in every case salvation is said to be achieved by something we have to do. But the good news of the Gospel is that Christ has done it! He alone has done what no man can do for himself and thus has set us free.

In chapters five and six the Apostle turns to the second and equally important aspect of this great truth, summarized in these words in chapter 1, verse 4:

... to deliver us from the present evil age, ... {Gal 1:4b RSV}

Christianity is not merely going to heaven when you die. It is also living now, in this present life. It is being set free from the controlling bondage to the world and its ways, its evil and wickedness, in our life now. It is to be delivered from this present evil age right now. This too is by the gift of Jesus Christ. Here again the apostle waxes hot upon these Galatians. He said earlier, "Oh, you foolish Galatians" {Gal 3:1a RSV}. "You simple minded people. Do you really think that you can begin in the Spirit and then proceed by means of the flesh and in that way accomplish your profession? Why, it is all of faith, all by the power of God that the Christian life is led."

He goes on to develop this theme, showing that the gospel of liberty in Jesus Christ, the life of freedom, must neither be lost through legalism nor abused through license. It certainly doesn't give us the right to do anything we like, any way we like. That is bondage just as much, but merely of another sort. True freedom is to be expressed in loving service for one another. This is truly life.

All legalists sum up their faiths essentially in the following way: They say that sincerity plus activity equals life. You can test any religious experience in the world by that measure and, unless it is the gospel of the grace of God, you will find that what it says, in one way or another, boils down to that. "Sincerity (that is 'faith') plus activity equals life as God intended it to be lived -- salvation or whatever you want to call it." But the truth is quite the opposite. It is that life + faith = activity. That is an entirely different thing. We work, not in order to be saved, nor to be blessed by God, but we work because we share the life of Jesus Christ in us.

Galatianism is still found today even though we are not likely to be asked to be circumcised or to observe the Sabbath. (There are groups who do this but essentially this is not a common danger to us.) Legalistic ideas

about keeping Lent, holy days, and rituals are better known modern forms of Galatianism, although they aren't serious threats to us either. But what we are in grave danger of forgetting is that Christ himself came to deliver us from this present evil age and that he does it by living his life in us. That is the key. We know that this age is evil. We feel its pressures to conform, to lower our standards, to believe all the lies shouted at us by TV, radio, billboards, magazines and in conversations -- everywhere.

The danger is that we think we can deliver ourselves from the trip of these pressures by setting up Christian programs, by filling our time with activity -- teaching in the Sunday School, playing the organ, leading young people's groups, joining Christian clubs and taking part in meetings. We think that this is what keeps us free, but that is Galatianism. It is the same kind of bondage that the apostle wrote about and it will deaden and dampen the spirit of an individual and bring him into bondage just as it did in Paul's day.

Compare it with the truth that Paul declares in the last two chapters of Galatians -- that Christ lives in us by the Spirit and reproduces his life in us. Therefore, the whole Christian walk is to repudiate the life of the flesh with its self-centeredness and to rely upon the work of the Spirit of God to reproduce in us the life of Jesus Christ. How beautifully all this is gathered up in the verse (chapter 2, verse 20) that is perhaps the best known of this whole letter:

I have been crucified with Christ; It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. {Gal 2:20 RSV}

The old self-centered "I" has been crucified with Christ so that it no longer has any right to live, and your task and my task is to see that it doesn't live, that it is repudiated, that it is put aside, along with its determination to express what Paul calls "the works of the flesh." See what they are (chapter 5, verses 19-21):

... immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, [by the way, sorcery is a word linked to pharmaceutical matters, including drugs like LSD and other psychedelic substances], enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. {Gal 5:19b-21a RSV}

All of these ugly characteristics are the works of the flesh -- the old self-centered life which, Paul declares, was judged and cut off in the cross and was replaced by the life of Jesus Christ made available to us. Therefore, dependence upon him to live in us and a willingness to let it be done, and to let him move us in the direction he desires, results in "the fruit of the Spirit" which is (verses 22-23):

... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. {Gal 5:22b-23 RSV}

Now this is where Christian liberty enters in. You haven't begun to live as God intended you to live until the fruit of the Spirit is a consistent manifestation in your life. Anything less is the bondage of legalism, with its dullness, apathy, indifference -- and its death.

Then Paul concludes with his wonderful sixth chapter in which he describes how being filled with the Spirit will result in our bearing one another's burdens, restoring one another in meekness, in gentleness of spirit, not in judgment nor in harshness, in giving liberally and freely to one another's needs, and in patient continuing in well-doing -- sowing to the Spirit instead of to the flesh.

Finally, the Apostle closes on one of the most personal notes in the whole New Testament. He says (verse 11):

See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. {Gal 6:11 RSV}

Painfully scratching it, hampered by poor eyesight, he says, "I don't want to glory in your flesh like these Judaizers do. They love to compel people to be circumcised because they think each person circumcised is another scalp they can hang on their belts as a sign that they have done something tremendous for God. That is not my glory." He says, "I glory in the cross of Christ which cuts off that kind of living, cuts it right off at the roots, cuts off the 'old man' with all his self-seeking, ambition, and self glory. The cross of our Lord Jesus

Christ which crucifies me unto the world and the world unto me -- that is my glory."

Now he says, "Don't any of you write to me and tell me that what I have written you is all wrong, because I want you to know that living this kind of life has been costly. I have earned the persecution of many. I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus."

If you challenge the world and its ways, you will find those who are resentful of the way you live and the way you think and some will be actively antagonistic. Some will be ready to burn you at the stake if they get a chance because you are defying the accepted standards of life. You are setting aside the principle upon which the world seeks to accomplish its ends. Your life is judging theirs and they resent it. But the apostle says, "It doesn't make any difference to me. I glory in the Lord Jesus Christ who has taught me what true liberty is, what it means to be a son of the living God and to live my life in the freedom and the joyfulness of personally knowing Jesus himself."

Prayer:

Our Father, how this letter challenges us in these lukewarm days in which we live, in which men and women talk much about commitment but very seldom evidence it. We pray that we may be captured by these words and see once again that life is not worth living if it be not lived for Christ, that the deceitfulness of our hearts must be judged in the light of your word, that we not be content with mere expression but only with that which comes from the reality of your Spirit at work in us. Produce in our lives, O great Spirit of God, that blessed fruit that glorifies the Father, and deny within us and help us to repudiate that which has been crucified and set aside in Jesus Christ, that we may receive from him all that he has provided. We ask in his name. Amen.

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